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## WEAR-DOWN HOLDS

- |                      |                         |                          |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Airplane spin     | 21. Face rake           | 41. Leg lock             |
| 2. Arm drag          | 22. Fireman's carry ram | 42. Leg sweep            |
| 3. Arm lock          | 23. Flying body press   | 43. Manager interference |
| 4. Asian spike       | 24. Flying clothesline  | 44. Monkey flip          |
| 5. Atomic drop       | 25. Flying drop kick    | 45. Overhead toss        |
| 6. Bear hug          | 26. Flying elbow drop   | 46. Pole ram             |
| 7. Bite              | 27. Flying head butt    | 47. Reverse chin lock    |
| 8. Body slam         | 28. Flying mare         | 48. Rolling scissors     |
| 9. Body tackle       | 29. Forearm smash       | 49. Rope burn            |
| 10. Bulldog          | 30. Foreign object      | 50. Russian sickle       |
| 11. Chicken wing     | 31. Full nelson         | 51. Savate kick          |
| 12. Choke slam       | 32. Giant swing         | 52. Scissors grip        |
| 13. Claw             | 33. Grapevine           | 53. Shoulder breaker     |
| 14. Clothesline      | 34. Hair pull           | 54. Slingshot            |
| 15. Cross body block | 35. Hammer lock         | 55. Snap mare            |
| 16. Double axehandle | 36. Head lock           | 56. Step-over toe hold   |
| 17. Drop kick        | 37. Head stomp          | 57. Suplex               |
| 18. Eagle split      | 38. Hip roll            | 58. Surfboard            |
| 19. Elbow smash      | 39. Irish whip          | 59. Turnbuckle smash     |
| 20. Eye gouge        | 40. Knee drop           | 60. Wrist lock           |

## SET-UP HOLDS

- |                       |                     |                        |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 61. Abdominal stretch | 71. Cradle          | 81. Power bomb         |
| 62. Avalanche         | 72. Crucifix        | 82. Power slam         |
| 63. Backbreaker       | 73. DDT             | 83. Scorpion deathlock |
| 64. Backroll press    | 74. Figure four     | 84. Sleeper            |
| 65. Belly to belly    | 75. Flying leg drop | 85. Slingshot suplex   |
| 66. Big splash        | 76. Gourd buster    | 86. Spine buster       |
| 67. Boston crab       | 77. Hurricanrana    | 87. Stunner            |
| 68. Brain buster      | 78. Moonsault       | 88. Sunset flip        |
| 69. Camel clutch      | 79. Neckbreaker     | 89. Superplex          |
| 70. Cobra clutch      | 80. Piledriver      | 90. Texas cloverleaf   |

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1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_

6 \_\_\_\_\_ 7 \_\_\_\_\_ 8 \_\_\_\_\_ 9 \_\_\_\_\_ 10 \_\_\_\_\_

SET-UP HOLDS: Choose 5 of the holds at the left numbered 61-90. Only use a hold once.

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_

FINISHING HOLD: Create your own custom final maneuver or choose a hold from our list.



# FROM the DESK OF...

I'VE BEEN STRUGGLING a bit with what to say in this, my first column as Editor-in-Chief of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. It's a tremendous honor to follow in the footsteps of Stu Saks, who announced back in March that he'd finally be taking the retirement he's worked so hard for. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also a little intimidated.

Over four decades, Stu turned this publication—once merely the newest of many popular titles under the Weston banner—into the most iconic, most trusted pro wrestling magazine of all time. Of course, he had a lot of help from a team of talented writers, editors, and photographers. But those who have worked alongside Stu know the truth: It's his vision that made *PWI* the world's number-one wrestling magazine.

*PWI* and its sister publications were a huge part of my childhood. They taught me about wrestlers whom I'd never seen before, while giving me the "inside scoop" on my favorite competitors. I devoured each issue from cover to cover—the perfect escape for a nerdy, chubby little kid who didn't have many friends.

As I grew older, my interest in wrestling waned for a while. I became more smitten with music and girls. Near the end of high school, I rediscovered wrestling and dove back in. Hard. I enjoyed it possibly even more than I did as a child.

When I went off to college, that enthusiasm only deepened. I'd venture back home on Monday nights to watch *Raw*, since my dorm room didn't get Spike TV. TNA started to gain momentum, and I became a fan of that, too. I sought out matches from Japan and Ring of Honor. Then, one day at a 7-Eleven, I saw it: a copy of the latest issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*.

I hadn't read the magazine with regularity in a while, but it was like reconnecting with an old friend. Sure, it was a much slicker product than what I'd read as a kid, but it still had so many of the features I'd loved all those years before. After reading a couple of issues, I noticed the *PWI* offices were in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania—mere minutes from my college campus. It occurred to me that maybe, if I played my cards right, I could intern for the magazine in my senior year.

It would make for a better story if I'd interned at this office. Truth is, I never reached out to ask if I could. Call it self-sabotage. But, as fate would have it, I'd get another chance to work for *PWI* before too long.

About a year after graduation, I was working full-time at a convenience store. At the time, it was proving difficult for me to break into the world of journalism. A friend sent me a Craigslist posting for a copy editor position based in Blue Bell. It said something to the effect of "pro wrestling knowledge is a plus."

It didn't take me more than a few seconds to realize this job posting was from Kappa Publishing. This was *PWI*! I submitted whatever clips I had available, including a piece of short fiction about wrestling. (Fun fact: While I wrote this story in 2005, it bore a strange resemblance to the 2008 film, *The Wrestler*. Darren Aronofsky, did you hack into my email?)

Stu Saks personally responded to my application. He said the job had been filled, but he liked my writing samples and would keep me in mind for freelance opportunities. Soon enough, I'd begin the 13-year journey with *PWI* that has led me to the position I'm in today.

So much has happened in those ensuing years, but those stories are for later. For now, let me just say I am deeply excited to take the reins of this fine publication. I hope to make Stu proud in the years ahead.

**Kevin McElvaney**  
Editor-in-Chief

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# Thunder Rosa

Even before joining the National Wrestling Alliance last year, Rosa had earned an international reputation as one of the most promising stars in women's wrestling. And she's incredibly determined to make an impact everywhere she goes. On page 60, the NWA Women's champion weighs in on her unconventional journey to the top of the mountain—from her early stint in Japan to her recent debut as a mixed martial artist.



PHOTO BY CHAD COOPER



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# BEFORE the BELL

COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

## WRESTLING FROM THE HEARTLAND

Raise a glass to 19th-century French mathematician Henri Poincaré, as well as the cast of the 2010 sci-fi comedy *Hot Tub Time Machine*. Thanks to this unlikely lot, mankind is appropriately forewarned that any travel into the past presents the risk of irrevocably changing the space-time continuum ... and altering reality as we know it. That's a lot of responsibility for an aspiring time hopper to assume. Fortunately, wrestling fans don't need to weigh such Herculean implications—or chase down the nearest wormhole—to revisit the salad days of some of today's best-known stars, thanks to Pro Wrestling Library's new DVD collection, *Wrestling From The Heartland: The Lost Developmental Territory, Vol. 1*.

In *Wrestling From The Heartland*, producer Joe Dombrowski guides viewers through a deep dive into the history of Heartland Wrestling Association, a bygone endeavor that once served as a developmental territory for both WCW and WWF. A veritable star chamber for aspiring wrestling luminaries, HWA was co-founded by the legendary Les Thatcher, who joins Dombrowski for commentary on this collection.

From Ron Simmons and Rikishi to The Big Show, the roster for this collection is replete with familiar faces appearing in decidedly unfamiliar settings, including college gymnasiums and minor league baseball fields. There's also very little chance you can watch it all in a single sitting. Running just over 6½ hours, *Wrestling From The Heartland* features a broad range of content, laden with hitherto unreleased gems that will appeal to most wrestling aficionados who still harbor healthy respect for pro wrestling in its purest, undiluted state. Some standout bouts include a “Raven’s Rules” match (featuring ECW originals Raven and Stevie Richards) and a 1998 meeting between Cactus Jack and Road Dogg. The crown jewel

of the collection is a 2001 match in which a young John Cena squares off against current *NXT* announcer Nigel McGuinness as part of a six-man tag contest.

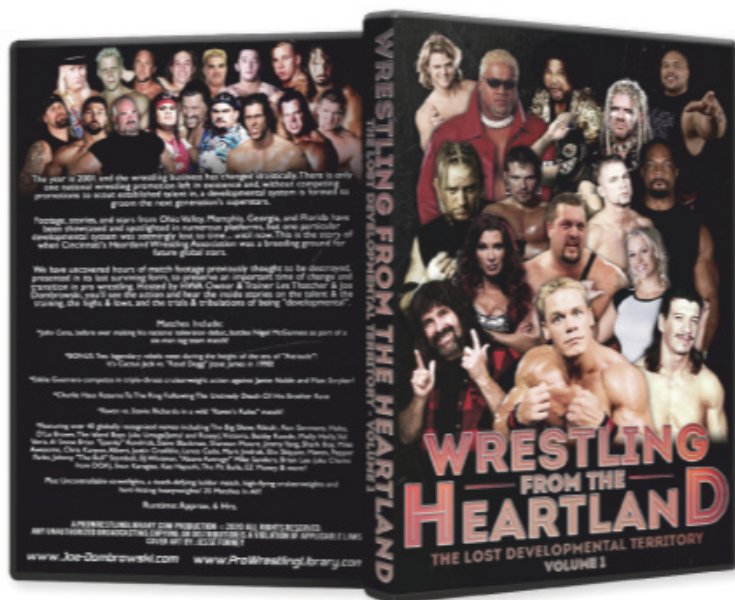
History and tradition are key components of *Wrestling From The Heartland*, but the anthology also includes some profoundly sentimental moments. Late wrestlers Eddie Fatu, Lance Cade, and Mike Awesome return to action once more in this collection, standing tall inside the squared circle. And, in one particularly poignant moment, Eddie Guerrero talks candidly to Thatcher regarding his personal struggles and accomplishments.

In his introductory comments, Dombrowski gives viewers a fair warning about all this “lost footage,” noting that some of the video isn’t at the level of present-day technology and production. Indeed, a good deal of the

video in *Wrestling From The Heartland* is grainy and degraded or filmed from fixed or less than optimal camera positions. These are certainly regrettable deficiencies, but it’s also the kind of thing that wrestling fans who appreciate unique and rare content will likely forgive—especially since they get to hear Thatcher reminisce with Dombrowski as they provide wall-to-wall coverage of all the matches.

All told, *Wrestling From The Heartland* is a sort of *Hot Tub Time Machine* for

wrestling enthusiasts. It’s hot and sweaty, and even a little silly from time to time. But it’s also a candid look at exactly how things once were ... and, in some respects, how they might have turned out differently. We give it 3½ out of five suplexes.





# TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

## 10. Florida allows WWE to remain in operation as an "essential business" during its statewide COVID-19 lockdown.

Simultaneously, the company handed out pink slips to a formidable cross-section of in-ring and backstage staff, creating a quantum mechanics anomaly known as "Schrödinger's essential workers."

## 9. WrestleMania 36 host and 24/7 champ Rob Gronkowski comes out of retirement from pro football, signing with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and reuniting with former teammate Tom Brady.

Brady later denied accusations that he had his sights set on landing the 24/7 strap for himself, despite the fact that Gronk had caught him Googling the phrase "how to deflate a title belt."

## 8. AEW enlists Mike Tyson for a special role at Double or Nothing.

The former heavyweight champ was set to unveil a new title belt featuring a leather strap garnished with real pieces of Evander Holyfield's right ear.

## 7. The Big Show stars in his own sitcom on Netflix.

Intrigued by the prospect of cross-promoting their own talent, Impact Wrestling cast Cody and Jake Deaner in a series of shadow-puppet shows to be aired exclusively on Sony's Crackle.

## 6. Speculation abounds that the legendary grappler Sting is leaving WWE.

It's a curious time to consider a career change, as the job market for *The Crow* impersonators isn't really so hot right now.

## 5. The Undertaker inks a new contract that will keep him with WWE for another 15 years.

Considering he will be almost 70 years old by the end of this contract, 'Taker might well opt to revisit his groundbreaking Boneyard Match with the first-ever "Get Off My Lawn Match."

## 4. Otis wins big at Money In the Bank.

The victory led to a slew of endorsement offers and press appearances, including cover shoots for *Tiger Beat* and a special, Otis-centric edition of *Dance Dance Revolution*.

## 3. King Corbin throws Rey Mysterio off the roof of Titan Tower.

Thankfully, Rey's fall was broken by the large pile of money that Triple H and Stephanie McMahon made by selling off their WWE stock.

## 2. Chris Jericho proclaims himself "The G.O.A.T." via Twitter.

Around the same time, Scott Hall was booted from Twitter for acting like a jackass.

## 1. Becky Lynch surrenders the WWE Women's championship, announcing that she is expecting a child with her fiancé Seth Rollins.

Although outspoken wrestling veteran Jim Cornette was initially critical of the developments, he later admitted that his feelings had been hurt when he learned he wasn't a candidate to be the child's godfather ... despite his enrollment in doula courses at the local YWCA.



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# WE HEARD THAT!

"I had a feeling that I was going to be one of the people, just because of the lack of communication between me and WWE management weeks before."

—LIO RUSH, discussing his release from WWE in an interview with *Sportskeeda*

"To me, I would rather take more unknown names, guys that don't have that big reputation yet, and show there is something special about them. I want to be a force to help introduce new stars to the world and magnify the work of those around me."

—KENNY OMEGA, talking to *SI.com* regarding his approach to working with new talent in AEW

"I'm non-judgmental about what other people are doing. They make decisions about what's best for their companies, and I respect whatever decisions they make. But I think there's a great sense of comfort for our people to know that there's someone caring in this regard—that I'm putting their health and welfare, the safety of all people involved, over the business right now."

—Ring of Honor COO JOE KOFF, on ROH's decision to suspend live shows in the midst of the COVID-19 public health crisis, *The PWI Podcast* (Ep. 144)



## ONE TO WATCH: O'SHAY EDWARDS

**T**he pro wrestling industry has its fair share of beefy, burly men plying their trade around the world. This makes it difficult for the aspiring big man to stand out among his massive peers. Most modern monsters differentiate themselves with a mingling of size and agility. But only a few move with malevolent intentions, striking fear in the hearts of opponents.

At an impressive 6'3", 270 pounds, O'Shay Edwards is that very monster. His methods, while not pretty, are highly effective—making him the quintessential beast vacationing in his opponents' worst fears.

The Mount Vernon, New York-born and Atlanta, Georgia-raised brawler's pro wrestling fandom began with early episodes of *Raw* and matured during the Monday Night War era. A father-son outing to a WWF house show at Madison Square Garden hooked him on the business. It was there that Edwards saw his favorite wrestler, Ahmed Johnson, in person and became enamored with the sport.

"He looked like me," recalled Edwards. "He was big, strong, and, when he stepped, you couldn't help but to look at him."

Hailing from an athletic and academic family, Edwards was uniquely equipped to traverse high school and college sports with some ease as the wrestling bug simmered within him. After spending years as a firefighter (among other jobs), he began training at the relatively late age of 30 under Johnny Swinger—an eight-month stint that led to training with Robert Gibson of The Rock 'n' Roll Express. He debuted in April 2016 and, admittedly, still had a lot to learn. With hard work, his skills steadily progressed to the point where he feels he's ready to make a serious mark on this sport.

Even in the toughest times, he never lacked confidence. His infectious swagger draws inspiration from The Rock, coupled with an in-ring style reminiscent of "Dr. Death" Steve Williams, Scott Norton, and Ron Simmons. He hits his opponents hard and relentlessly, eschewing the fancy footwork of others for a no-nonsense efficiency—echoing the sentiment, "I get paid by the job, not by the hour."

"Have you ever seen a grown man manhandle another human being? Well, I 'grown-man' grown men," said Edwards, who proudly wears the moniker "Big Bad Kaiju" (a Japanese term meaning "great monster").

Edwards enhances his blue-chipper bravado with an aura similar to *Pulp Fiction*'s Marsellus Wallace and *Rocky III*'s Clubber Lang. He proj-

ects a calculated calm, speaking to be heard once ... and making understood he will do exactly what he says. "The Big Bad Kaiju" is physically imposing, but he's also clearly a student of the game.

Edwards is the reigning champion of Prime Time Pro Wrestling, where he has scored wins over Suge D and Billy Dixon, among others. He's also made his presence felt in the South, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeastern U.S., in promotions like Beyond Wrestling, Southern Underground Pro, and Black Label Pro. In addition, he's spent time honing his craft in ROH's Future of Honor developmental system.

The reality of COVID-19 has temporarily paused Edwards' march toward recognition on the national stage, but the 36-year-old "Big Bad Kaiju" remains undaunted by these challenges.

"Without struggle, there is no progress," Edwards stated. "This defines who you are as a person, and my body of work speaks for itself. I put people where they don't want to be, and I am the guy you want to talk about."

—Ashley Morris

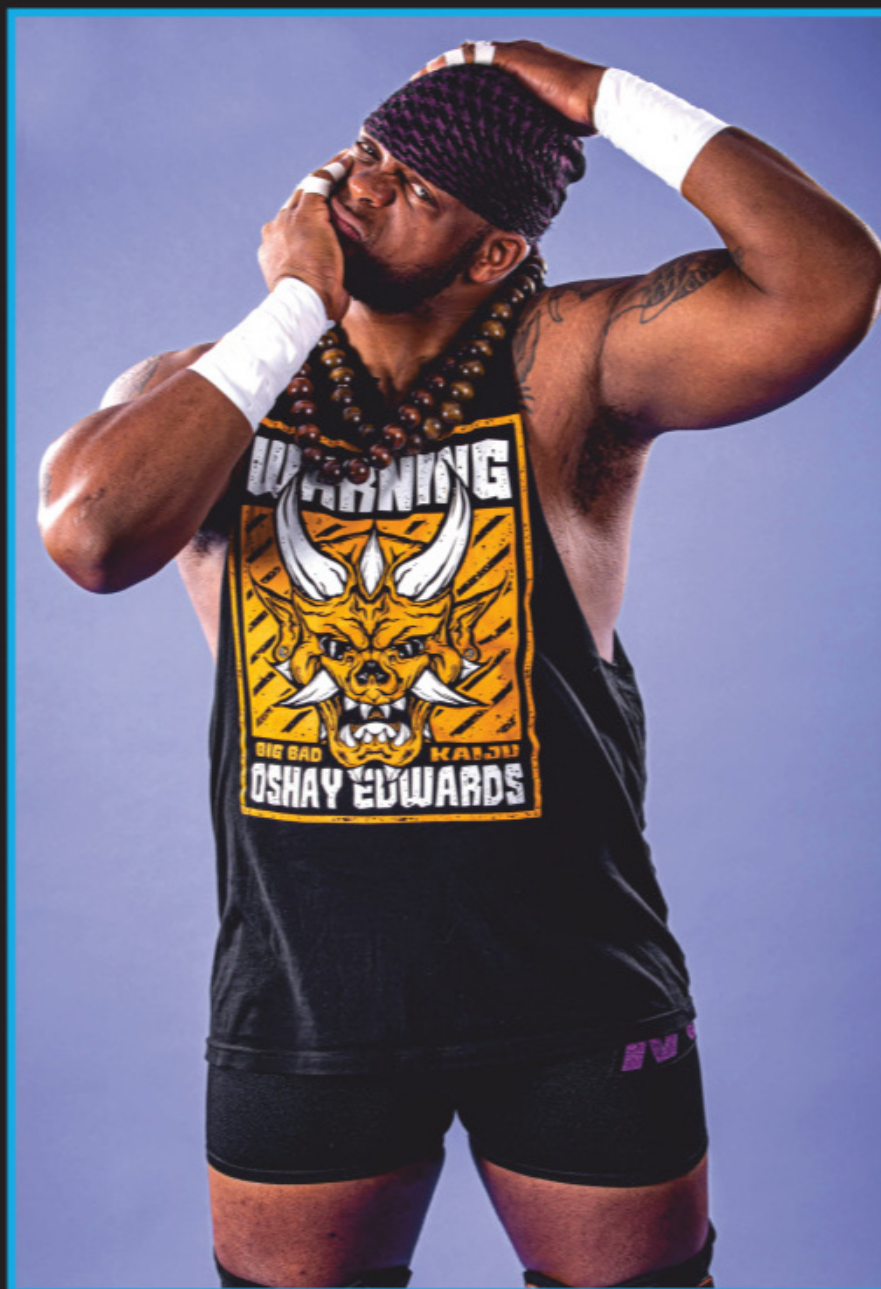


PHOTO BY JAYLEE PHOTOGRAPHY



## BEHIND THE CURTAIN: *ALICIA ATOUT*

**H**ockey legend Wayne Gretzky has been quoted as saying, “You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.” In pro wrestling, fellow Ontarian Alicia Atout has embodied this same philosophy on her burgeoning path to success as a wrestling broadcaster.

The 25-year-old Atout has already covered a lot of ground in her quest to become “The Interview Queen.” At age 17, she founded the award-winning website, AMBY (short for A Music Blog, Yea?). What’s now a treasure trove of interviews with famous musicians, wrestlers, and other entertainers started out as a simple hobby.

“I would write reviews for songs and albums that I loved, and just post them online,” explains Atout. “Then it got to the point where I went to a concert with my family and they were actually telling me, ‘Why don’t you interview the band? They’re right there!’ We had this crappy little camera, so I did it. Next thing you know, people started watching it. It just grew very organically.”

Before long, Atout found herself speaking with such music greats as Motorhead and Metallica. “The Metallica interview, I’ll never forget,” she said. “I was so nervous. It was the first really big interview a label had thrown at me.”

AMBY began featuring wrestling at the suggestion of Atout’s father, who’d introduced her to the sport as a child. “My dad would have tons of friends over after they’d play basketball together,” she said. “They’d literally just sit me on the couch when I was two or three years old, and I just wouldn’t leave. I never grew out of it.”

Following the launch of AMBY’s wrestling section, Atout quickly found herself immersed in a new world. “I did my first wrestling interview at Smash Wrestling here in Toronto,” she said. “Two weeks later, they said, ‘Hey, we need a backstage host. Are you interested?’ It just completely blew up and blossomed from there.”

Atout’s work with Smash led to gigs freelancing for both Impact and All Elite Wrestling, where she again took her fate into her own hands. “I interviewed a bunch of people for my site from Ring of Honor, and that put me in touch with Cody Rhodes,” she said. “When I had heard these rumors floating around about AEW, I texted Cody and said, ‘Hey, if you ever need someone to host interviews, I’m your girl.’” Sure enough,

she was invited to conduct on-screen interviews at the inaugural All In and Double or Nothing events.

In late-2019, Atout received her first full-time contract with Major League Wrestling, a company to which she’s grown very loyal. “It’s amazing when you get to stand back and see all of your friends wrestling match after match, putting in just as much effort in their fifth as they would for the first,” she said. “And then, afterwards, the camaraderie of, ‘Oh, my gosh, we’re finally done this crazy day.’ We can’t wait for it to air and see how it comes together. It’s a really good feeling.”

While Atout’s research skills and confidence are key factors in her success, she credits one thing above all else: genuine interest.

“I’m just trying to have fun, make everyone feel welcome, and not make them feel like I’m going to betray them in the end,” says Atout. “Just give them that comfort. We’re gonna have a good time.” □

—Jake Joyce



PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD



# RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

**T**HE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, the clashes between police and the communities they're supposed to serve ... the only positive about these worst of times is they came at a time of relative stability (at least in terms of the economy at large). Yet even a billion-dollar company such as WWE cannot maintain its business model without worldwide touring and butts in seats.

In addition to reducing executive and board member compensation and postponing plans to

expand its headquarters, WWE trimmed the talent rosters for all three brands. The list of released wrestlers and referees was scary because it ranged from talent that barely had a chance to prove themselves to longtime employees and popular superstars.

"Rusev Day" chants once reverberated throughout arenas around the world. But, without the crowds chanting his name, **Rusev** made the list. **Erick Rowan** was involved in a major angle, the conspiracy to eliminate **Roman Reigns**, only

a few months ago. The OC is no more, with the release of the long-underutilized duo of **Karl Anderson** and **Luke Gallows**. (Meanwhile, **AJ Styles** was granted a needed change of scenery from *Raw* to *Smackdown*.) **Mike Chioda** had served as a top referee since the 1980s. **EC3**, perhaps the greatest talent yet to shine in WWE, was denied once again. Even the stars who have survived every other storm—**Curt Hawkins**, **Zack Ryder**, and **Heath Slater**—were let go. How's Heath going to feed those kids now?

Other wrestlers released included **Curtis Axel**, **Aiden English**, **Eric Young**, **Lio Rush**, **Sarah Logan**, **Primo** and **Epico Colon**, **Maria** and **Mike Kanellis**,

**No Way Jose**, **Kassius Ohno**, **Deonna Purrazzo**, **Aleksandar Jaksic**, and **Tino Sabbatelli**.

Of course, many of these superstars have ambitions of signing with AEW, and legitimate hopes that WWE's rival would handle their careers with more creativity and consideration. While a select few may receive that opportunity, AEW has also lost millions of dollars during the pandemic—a devastating reality for what remains essentially a startup business.

But amidst the heartache, there are signs of hope. Only weeks after receiving his release, **Kurt Angle** was back on WWE TV and likely to re-sign with the company. And WWE has signaled that some of the releasees will return when conditions improve.

**Drake Maverick**, whose anguished social media video drew the empathy of fans everywhere, was granted an opportunity to compete in the recent NXT cruiserweight title tournament. The ultimate underdog, Maverick made it to the final against new arrival **El Hijo del Fantasma**. It was an incredibly hard-fought bout that ended with Fantasma dropping Maverick with the Phantom Driver to secure the gold. Maverick looked into the camera and thanked the fans. And, ever the babyface authority figure, **Triple H** met Maverick on the entrance ramp and offered him a new NXT contract.

During a media call to promote NXT TakeOver: In Your House, Triple H insisted Maverick's release was legitimate and that it was the unsinkable Brit's tenacious work ethic that saved his spot in NXT.

To no one's surprise, the June 7 TakeOver event received rave reviews. From the opening segment featuring **Todd Pettengill** to the phenomenal three-way main event, the WWE Universe had to be cheering at home, even if they couldn't be at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida.

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Triple H presents Drake Maverick with a new NXT contract following his performance in the final of the cruiserweight title tournament—a reward for his incredible work ethic.





**Io Shirai celebrates with the NXT Women's title belt after winning it in the main event of TakeOver: In Your House.**

**Io Shirai**, the heralded Stardom pioneer, finally got her due in WWE by capturing the NXT Women's title in a bout also involving **Rhea Ripley** and defending champ **Charlotte Flair**. Heading into the match, Ripley and Flair, who had already clashed at WrestleMania, overshadowed the third participant. Yet Shirai had the final say. As Flair had Ripley trapped in the figure-eight leglock, Shirai came flying with a moonsault off the top rope, landing on Ripley and breaking the figure-eight. Shirai pinned Ripley for the victory at the 18-minute mark.

And there was a key question leading up to TakeOver: With **Velveteen Dream** receiving his final shot at the NXT title, would he achieve his long-held goal of becoming champion ... or would **Adam Cole** emerge triumphant, possibly sending Dream to the Raw or Smackdown brand?

The "Backlot Brawl" was another one of those epic, cinematic matches that have come to the fore during the pandemic. But Hollywood couldn't have written a better back-story, or engaged the fans to a greater degree.

In the glare of headlights, Cole and Dream pounded each other on one car hood after another and used a barrage of ladders and chairs. Even **Dexter Lumis** emerged to stuff members of the **Undisputed Era** into the trunk of a Chevy Impala.

It was more action-adventure movie than wrestling match, but the efforts of both superstars were incredible. Dream seemed

on the verge of victory when Cole hit him with a low blow and used his Panama Sunrise to drop Dream on a pile of steel chairs at 14:55.

In other matches, North American champion **Keith Lee** defeated **Johnny Gargano** ... **Finn Balor** pinned **Damian Priest** ... **Shotzi Blackheart**, **Tegan Nox**, and **Mia Yim** beat **Raquel Gonzalez**, **Dakota Kai**, and **Candice LeRae**.

Congratulations to **Cody Rhodes**, who defeated **Lance Archer** in a tournament final to become the inaugural AEW TNT champion. I can't think of a more appropriate champion. Just as his father, **Dusty Rhodes**, made the NWA TV title relevant during the glory days of his feud with the Four Horsemen (a point the current-day NWA has driven home recently), Rhodes is establishing the TNT title as a workhorse championship—and it's certainly a good idea to associate Cody closely with the TNT brand.

Rhodes' recent title defense against **Jungle Boy** on *Dynamite* reaffirmed this. Jungle Boy, the gutsy up-and-comer, battled valiantly for 13 minutes, and the veteran champion bled profusely,



**A bloodied Cody Rhodes gives props to challenger Jungle Boy, whom he'd just defeated in his first successful defense of the AEW TNT championship.**





constantly wiping his eyes to continue the fight. **Tony Schiavone's** commentary and **Arn Anderson's** stunned reactions certainly brought back memories. Bravo, Cody and Jungle Boy!

Former Impact champion **Brian Cage** made his long-awaited AEW debut in the Casino Ladder Match at Double or Nothing. He's definitely coming across as the monster he should be, finishing off the hapless **Shawn Dean** in only one minute on a recent episode of *Dynamite*. With Cage's penchant for overhead suplexes and **Taz** in his corner, we're definitely seeing a **Brock Lesnar-Paul Heyman** dynamic here.

Impact champion **Tessa Blanchard** will be notably missing in action for the near future. Blanchard has missed two sets of *Impact Wrestling* tapings, as a tournament is being taped to determine a new top contender to her title. According to *Pro Wrestling Torch*, Blanchard is currently living in Mexico and is sheltering in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her two-year contract expires in a few months.

How do you produce a wrestling show without wrestling? The NWA is giving it a try, and the entertaining result is *Carnyland*. There have been some gems, including **Allysin Kay** instructing

heels on how to get heat and **Royce Isaacs'** "100% Pure" hand sanitizer (with a photo of **Sal Rinauro** to symbolize "feeling dirty"), along with appearances by owner **Billy Corgan**.

There have been some previous attempts at this, including WWE's *Tuesday Night Titans* show in the mid-1980s. The only downside is the performers risk being *too* comedic, and the NWA may come across as a retro-parody of the territorial days.

Another casualty of the pandemic is WWE's summer tour of Japan. **Shinsuke Nakamura**, **The Kabuki Warriors**, **Drew McIntyre**, **Charlotte Flair**, **Seth Rollins**, **AJ Styles**, **Bobby Lashley**, and **Andrade** were among those slated to appear at Osaka's EDION Arena on July 2, and then the Yokohama Arena on July 3 and 4. So much for **Asuka's** hometown welcome!

The story of **Shad Gaspard** captivated the world on May 17, when he and his son, **Aryeh Gaspard**, were among a group of swimmers caught in a rip current in Venice Beach, California. Gaspard shouted for lifeguards to rescue his son first before he disappeared underwater. His body washed ashore three days later. Gaspard's death (at age 39) received mainstream coverage.

Born in Brooklyn in 1981, Gaspard had all the street cred of the character he portrayed as a member of **Cryme Tyme**, a popular tag team in WWE between 2006 and 2010. Gaspard and **JTG** held the OVW tag team championship, in addition to other indie tag titles. In 2016, Gaspard stopped an armed robbery of a gas station in Coral Springs, Florida, by restraining the intoxicated perpetrator until police arrived on the scene. Before his wrestling career, Gaspard had served as a bodyguard for celebrities such as **Britney Spears**, **P. Diddy**, and **Mike Tyson**.

Shad was a true hero.

The wrestling world mourned again later that week, as it was reported that beloved Japanese wrestler **Hana Kimura** had tragically taken her own life at age 22. The daughter of **Kyoko Kimura**, Hana was one of the most promising performers in the Stardom promotion. She'd also competed for Shimmer and in a special pre-show match at this year's *Wrestle Kingdom* event.

Wrestlers from around the world paid their respects to Kimura on social media, as well as on TV. **Sasha Banks** recently sported a "HANA" armband on *Smackdown*, while **Dakota Kai** dyed her hair pink (to match Kimura's signature look) for her match at *TakeOver: In Your House*. And AEW shared a brief, though heartfelt tribute during its *Double or Nothing* event.

**Kairi Sane**, who had competed with Kimura in Stardom, carried an umbrella on the June 1 edition of *Raw* bearing the words "Hana-chan, thank you." She also paid her respects on Twitter, writing, "Hana-chan, I lost an important, irreplaceable companion. There is a hole in my mind and it is difficult to accept this reality now."

Perhaps the most famous voice in wrestling was silenced on April 16, when **Howard Finkel** died in an assisted living facility at age





**Hana Kimura delivers a missile dropkick to Kagetsu in the opening match of the NJPW/ROH G1 Supercard at Madison Square Garden. Kimura's recent passing shook the wrestling world, inspiring countless tributes from her peers.**

69. Finkel began working for Vincent J. McMahon in 1975 and became a ring announcer at New York's Madison Square Garden two years later. He secured a full-time job with the WWF in 1980 and became its longest-serving employee.

Yet the moment that seared Finkel into history was his announcement of **Hulk Hogan** as "the newwww World Wrestling Federation heavyweight champion" after Hogan's historic win over **The Iron Sheik** at the Garden on January 23, 1984. He became a staple of WWF programming as its top ring announcer and served in a backstage role in later years.

Another fixture of the WWF during the golden MSG years was referee **Jack Lotz**, who passed away on April 18 at age 86. He officiated the same Hogan-Sheik match, as well as **Bob Backlund's** WWF title victory over **Superstar Graham** in 1978. He was registered with the New York

State Athletic Commission as a referee for 33 years, and served in the Korean War.

Other deaths of note include 1970s star **Winona Littleheart**, who had a strange mid-'80s comeback as **The Lock** in **Kevin Sullivan's** demonic army (age 64); **Joe Pedicino**, the force behind the syndicated program *Pro Wrestling This Week* in the 1980s and the Texas-based Global Wrestling Federation in the early-'90s (age 70); former Xtreme Pro Wrestling champion **Supreme**, who pioneered the deathmatch concept (age 49); **Danny Havoc**, who mixed his technical skills with the hardcore style in *Combat Zone Wrestling* (age 34); and **Dick Steinborn**, who briefly held the AWA World tag team title with **Doug Gilbert** and wrestled everyone from **Gorgeous George** to **Bret Hart** during his 34-year career (age 86).

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### STILL A ROCK STAR

Drake Maverick has not only the desire, but also the talent and the rare connection with fans to remain a permanent draw, alongside Nick Aldis, Marty Scurll, Nigel McGuinness, and other Brits who have succeeded in the States. It's been evident since his days on *TNA British Boot Camp*. And, in my opinion, one of the greatest matches in the history of Impact Wrestling was his bloody, brutal fight against then-TNA champ EC3. Awesome.

### OH, TODD!

Todd Pettengill got a solid reaction at NXT TakeOver: In Your House. Pettengill is synonymous with that cheesy mid-1990s era, when Eric Bischoff was raiding Vince's roster, announcers relentlessly infused their commentary with topical references, and the WWF introduced a low-budget alternative to the traditional PPV, the In Your House concept. His novelty song, referring to "Billionaire Ted" and "Nacho Man," stole the show at the 1996 Slammys.

### THE GOLDEN AGE

There's the Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection and the Attitude Era, but we don't have a snappy name for the classic WWF period, from 1963 to 1983. Howard Finkel, with his tuxedo and booming delivery, symbolized the era, as did referees Jack Lotz, Dick Kroll, and Dick Woehrle—back when we knew the referees' names. Back when they introduced the ringside physician and members of the state athletic commission. It all seemed so legit.

### SO LONG, JOE

Sometimes called "The Round Mound of Sound," Joe Pedicino was very successful in broadcast communications, owner of radio stations in central Georgia and serving as management consultant for Turner Broadcasting among other entities. He broke new ground with *Pro Wrestling This Week*, featuring Pedicino, Gordon Solie, and Bill Apter. And we can thank Joe for showcasing his beautiful wife, Boni Blackstone, in his ventures.



# QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

**W**ITH MOST OF the U.S. in lockdown over the spring because of the COVID-19 pandemic, television networks had to find innovative ways to entertain audiences ... even as those doing the entertaining were at home. One big hit for ABC was *The Disney Family Singalong*, which featured artists belting out beloved anthems from classic Walt Disney films from their living rooms. To each his own, I guess.

Personally, if I want to hear obnoxious caterwauling from my TV speakers, I'll just wait for Nia Jax's entrance music to start playing.

Enjoy this "Quick Count" tribute to some of Disney's most iconic tunes. Off to work I go ...

## A WHOLE NEW WORLD

It's amazing how quickly the wrestling community adapted to life during a pandemic. When WWE put on its first event with no fans at the Performance Center in March, the sight was downright surreal. Not only have fans, wrestlers, and promoters since gotten used to it, they've all made the most of it.

From positioning the hard camera to face the entryway, rather than empty seats, to strategically positioning wrestlers in the

stands to simulate actual fans, AEW and WWE have both felt their way through these bizarre times. The result has often been enjoyable.

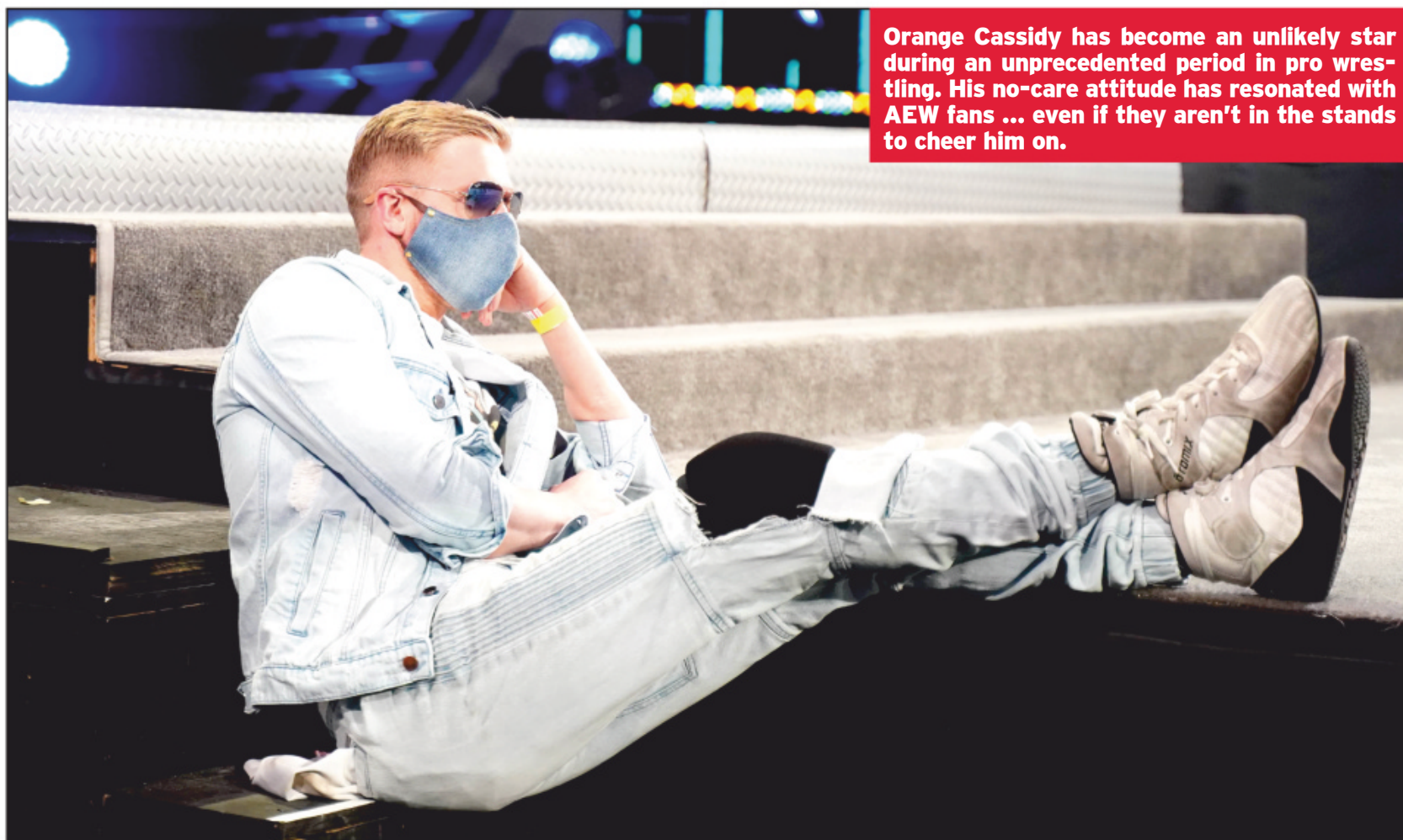
Wrestlers have adjusted to using their parked cars as their dressing rooms and cutting impassioned promos to dead silence. And fans have replaced going to live shows or getting together with other fans with virtual viewing parties over Zoom.

It's not the televised wrestling that we all had come to know, but it's better than nothing.

## BE OUR GUEST

Although the large crowds that major wrestling companies had been used to performing in front of may not be back for a while, promoters may have an opportunity to still generate some live gate revenue from those with the willingness (and the means) to pony up.

If WWE and AEW could scatter some wrestlers in the stands for television tapings, why couldn't they do the same with some actual fans? With proper health screenings and safety



Orange Cassidy has become an unlikely star during an unprecedented period in pro wrestling. His no-care attitude has resonated with AEW fans ... even if they aren't in the stands to cheer him on.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW





Senior referee Mike Chioda was part of a slew of talent cuts made by WWE in mid-April. A fixture of WWE events for three decades, Chioda officiated memorable moments like Seth Rollins' first World title win at WrestleMania 31.

protocols in place—including the observation of social distancing—it's at least theoretically possible to welcome some fans back into arenas.

Who would these fans be, you might ask? That's the tricky part. First, preference should be given to special cases, including fans from the Make-A-Wish community, if they can be accommodated safely. Once they're taken care of, maybe promoters would consider auctioning off tickets, and perhaps dedicating a portion of the proceeds to charity.

And if you don't think there would be a long line of people ready to spend thousands of dollars or more to be able to say they were ringside at SummerSlam during a pandemic, you don't know wrestling fans.

### **YOU AIN'T NEVER HAD A FRIEND LIKE ME**

Wrestling tradition dictates that you need fans in the stands to get a wrestler over. But Orange Cassidy is not big on wrestling tradition.

Somehow, in the middle of a pandemic—with few if any fans in the stands—the Stewartsville, New Jersey, native has become a bona fide breakout star for AEW.

Cassidy, who debuted in AEW as a sort of lackey for the tag team of Chuck Taylor and Trent, quickly eclipsed the “Best Friends” with his couldn't-be-bothered cool demeanor.

From the Aviator shades and acid-washed jeans to wrestling with his hands in his pockets and deliberately throwing kicks that wouldn't knock the seeds off a dandelion, “The King Of Sloth Style's” take on professional wrestling is entirely fresh. Or should that be “freshly squeezed”?

### **THE BARE NECESSITIES**

As it has with people throughout the world, the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced WWE shot-callers to reevaluate what they need to get by.

For the last quarter-century, the weekly cycle of WWE TV has been dominated by decisions that can distract from its core mission of putting out a quality wrestling product. It has to be somewhat liberating for WWE's production team to no longer concern itself with which cities and arenas to run in or how to mask sparse attendance. Plus, the ring crew doesn't need to set up the “TitanTron” screen or pyrotechnics.

As the world anxiously awaits a return to normalcy, WWE could stand to learn some lessons about what it takes to put on a quality wrestling show: a ring, some decent production design and lighting, and some enthusiastic fans—even if there aren't that many of them. Heck, as it turns out, it doesn't even need to be live.

### **POOR UNFORTUNATE SOULS**

The WWE's streamlined production expense isn't the only way the company has cut costs during the coronavirus outbreak.

At the height of the pandemic, WWE announced the release of about two-dozen contracted performers. Many more developmental talents were also let go, and several backstage workers were furloughed.

The casualties included such mainstays as Zack Ryder, Rusev, and Heath Slater, as well as match producers and creative writers. Even senior official Mike Chioda, who began working for the company in the 1980s, was axed.

WWE executives, in announcing the cuts, said they were in response to “COVID-19 and current government-mandated impacts on WWE and the media business generally.” But WWE's attempts to cry poverty fell flat with a lot of fans ... especially given the company reported record profits in 2019.

The timing couldn't have been worse for many of the men and women who found themselves without a paycheck in the middle of a pandemic, who were unable to find meaningful employment while most of the pro wrestling industry was on hold.

In its mission statement, WWE touts its responsibility of “putting smiles on people's faces.” Sadly, there were a few days during the pandemic where the company was not doing its job. □



# WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

**"D**IAMOND" DALLAS PAGE shrugged off talk of COVID-19 with a laugh. I knew it would take more than a pandemic to get this man down. Admittedly, sometimes I invent reasons to call people I haven't spoken with in a while, and maybe I just needed a dose of "Positively Page."

DDP has plenty of reasons to be upbeat. His *Yoga for Regular Guys* series has become a staple workout program, and reports are that sales of his 2019 release *Positively Unstoppable: The Art Of Owning It* have surged in recent months, as many people have

looked to self-help to cope and improve themselves, both mentally and physically. And he's been highly visible as Cody Rhodes' mentor on *AEW Dynamite* over the past several months.

I wanted to get Page's take on wrestling's current crisis: the lack of live attendance.

I asked about Drew McIntyre, suggesting he was robbed of his WrestleMania moment and the glory of 75,000 fans celebrating his WWE title victory. "He'll get his glory, though," answered Page, rejecting the negativity. "Hats off to Drew McIntyre. He's real special and he did terrific—he wasn't

robbed of anything. I called Drew because I suspected he was bothered by the same thing, and I said to him, 'How long does it take you to remember the main event of WrestleMania 22 or WrestleMania 31?' No one's gonna forget who won at WrestleMania 36, the WrestleMania during the pandemic!"

Often, I've felt that WWE has failed to establish an intimate connection with fans (although I've seen progress as of late, particularly in NXT). Page pushed back against that, too, stating the talent in both WWE and AEW have done very well under the circumstances. Not surprisingly, Page had very high praise for Cody Rhodes' leadership in AEW (both on TV and behind the scenes) during this time.

But it's still rough. While merchandise sales and social media are indicators of success for WWE and AEW, it must be frightening for the creative teams of both companies to not receive direct fan feedback. From the wrestlers calling audibles inside the ring to the promoter making booking decisions behind the curtain, the reactions of a live crowd are the best gauge of individual performances and the overall product.

"Diamond" Dallas Page should know that better than anyone. Relatively few performers are really notable for becoming main-eventers based primarily on massive groundswells of fan support: Becky Lynch, Daniel Bryan, Steve Austin, Bill Goldberg, and, yes, Page are among the best examples.

If not for chants of "DDP," the "Self High-Five" signs, and all the Diamond Cutter gestures, Page wouldn't have skyrocketed to stardom—earning three WCW World titles between 1999 and 2001.

"The place would erupt for me because I captured the adrenaline of the crowd," recalled Page.

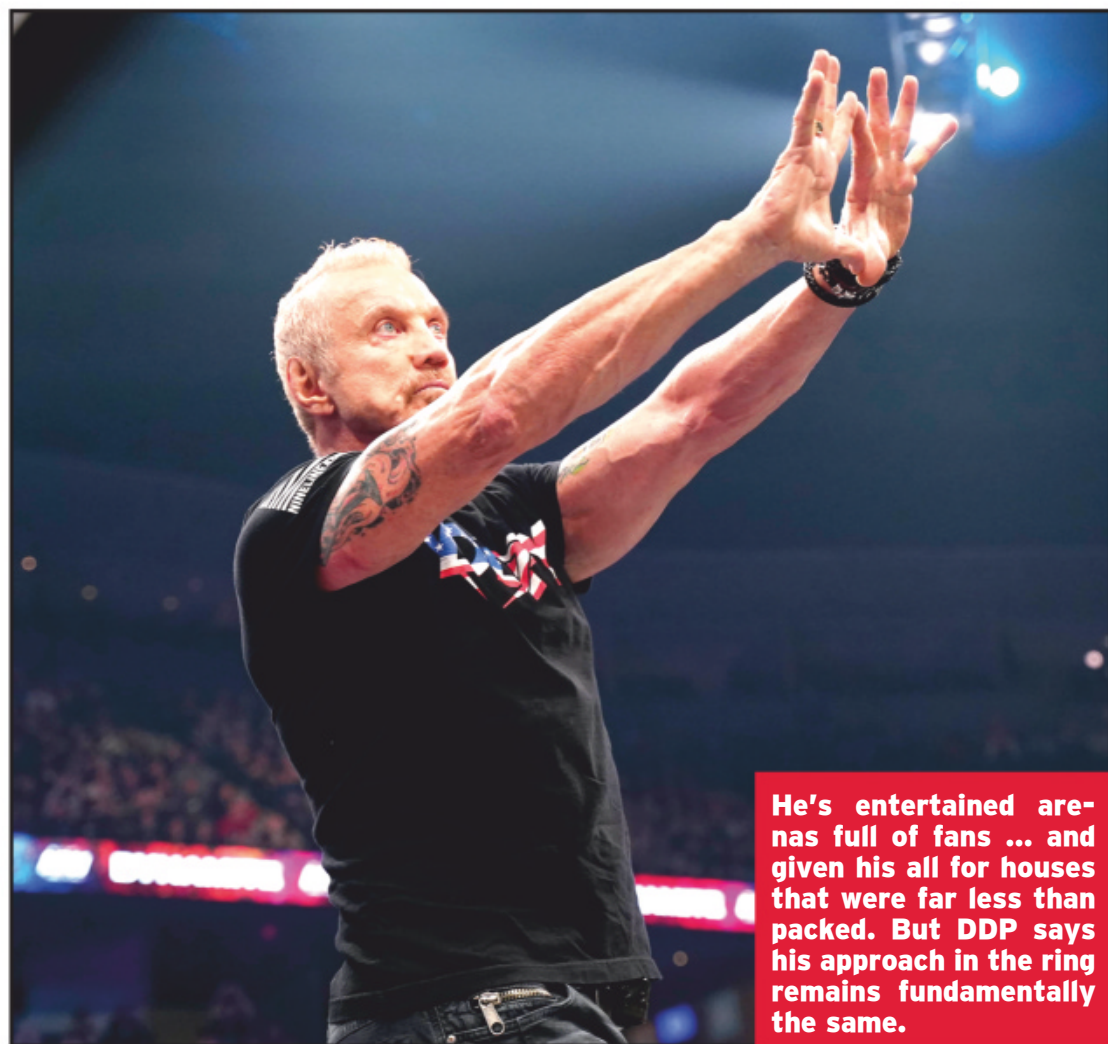


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

He's entertained arenas full of fans ... and given his all for houses that were far less than packed. But DDP says his approach in the ring remains fundamentally the same.





Drew McIntyre's "WrestleMania moment" happened at an empty Performance Center. Ever the optimist, Page says "The Chosen One's" World title victory will be far more memorable for the unusual setting in which it occurred.

"My career blew up when I was 40, and I don't think that's happened to anyone else. And I owe it to those fans who were chanting 'DDP.' I remember we were in Macon, Georgia, and Buff Bagwell told me, 'The whole place is chanting your name.' Hulk told me it's really special when they chant your name, like 'Ho-gan,' 'Stone Cold,' or 'Rocky.' With those fans behind me, I could go anywhere."

I suggested to Page that he was quite lucky, being trained at the WCW Power Plant, groomed to perform on television from the very start. He bristled at the notion, reminding me of his managerial and color commentary days in the AWA and Florida ... nearly getting in fights with burly guys in the crowd during the kayfabe era.

Page also reminded me that his smallest audiences weren't in the AWA, where about 1,000 people would attend TV tapings, but in WCW between 1991 and 1995—just before the Monday Night War. "Baltimore might have drawn good crowds," he said, "but everywhere else was crap. Even in Charlotte, North Carolina, with Ric Flair on top, we only drew about 400 people."

That had to be disappointing to Page, considering he actually made his onscreen debut at WrestleMania 6—featuring The Ultimate Warrior vs. Hulk Hogan in the main event—in front of 67,678 fans. "Bushwhacker Luke used to come into the club where I worked, and Luke called Pat Patterson and told him about my pink Cadillac. Pat asked how much it would cost to book my car, and I told him I had to be part of the deal."

History was made. Page chauffeured the team of Rhythm 'n' Blues—The Honky Tonk Man and Greg Valentine—to the ring at the Toronto SkyDome. "I never experienced anything like that in my life!" exclaimed Page. "I've learned since then that a wrestling crowd is a wrestling crowd wherever you go. But WrestleMania is an entirely different animal. It's like comparing the Super Bowl to every other football game—no comparison!"

Page would find himself at the SkyDome 12 years later, this time as an actual competitor. He successfully defended the WWF European title against Christian at 'Mania 18, an event most notable for The Rock squaring off with Hulk Hogan.

I suppose, in the old days, Hans Schmidt might have gone out of his way to rile up Hatpin Mary. Or maybe Carlos Colon had some techniques to cool down the hot crowds in Puerto Rico. There's probably more fan interaction at house shows, and perhaps more improvisation at independent shows. And yet, Page cleared up some misconceptions I had about performances in front of live crowds in the pay-per-view/streaming age. DDP said he has never varied his performances based on crowd size or temperament.

"I was used to being on television and performing for the people at home, so I never looked beyond the first few rows," said Page, who mesmerized viewers with his live promos on *Nitro*. "Those people were pivotal because I had to get over with them. But, no, I didn't change my approach."

DDP said he was fortunate because he wasn't a typical babyface—more like an antihero such as Steve Austin or The Road Warriors. Maybe a babyface at heart, but still a heel in spirit. That's why he doesn't recall any difficulties at a historically tough venue like Long Island's Nassau Coliseum or in front of the often-unforgiving fans in Philadelphia.

Yet Page has fond memories of one particular arena: the United Center in Chicago. "First there's the design of the arena," he said. "It's as if the seats go straight up into the ceiling, and the fans are right on top of you. And the Chicago fans are ravenous! There's a saying about Chicago fans: 'They all believe when no one else does!'"

Sadly, we're missing that now. The fans in those arenas help us all believe, sweeping us up in the excitement of the moment. Those fans also believed in "Diamond" Dallas Page ... and created a superstar. I look forward to the day that special magic is back. □



# THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

**"S**OME ARE BORN great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." So wrote The Immortal Bard four centuries ago. It's as true today as it was then. We've weighed this issue whenever debating who should be considered the greatest of all time at any endeavor. Nowhere is this truer than in professional wrestling, where we love endlessly arguing over who is better than whom. And when it comes to someone like Chris Jericho, all

three of Shakespeare's options may apply.

After all, Jericho comes from sports royalty, being the son of New York Rangers left-winger Ted Irvine. He's accomplished more than almost anyone in the business, being a seven-time world champion across two different promotions, as well as one of the sport's top attractions for over 20 years. And time and again, he's answered the call to greatness, stepping up to the plate to hit a home run when he was most needed.

Yet, for all Jericho's overwhelming accomplishments and undeniable talent, the question remained: Did he deserve inclusion on that fabled list of the greatest of all time? Surely, Jericho is and always has been great, but has he achieved true G.O.A.T. status—as he recently claimed in a post on Twitter?

I, like many, would say the answer is currently yes. But, if you had asked me that question as recently as two years ago, I would have likely said, "No, not quite." That changed when Jericho came to All Elite Wrestling and helped put the burgeoning promotion on the map.

I suppose this begs the question: What *makes* a wrestler one of the greatest of all time? In my mind, there are a few qualifying factors, and Jericho has long possessed most of them.

## IN-RING ABILITY

"The Ayatollah Of Rock 'n' Rolla" has it in spades. He was an innovative high-flyer at the



Even at the height of his powers in WWE, Chris Jericho found himself sharing the spotlight with other competitors like Edge. According to our newest columnist, Brian Solomon, this kept Jericho at arm's length of ever truly being "The Greatest."





As a part of All Elite Wrestling, Jericho is unequivocally the biggest star on the entire roster—a distinction that had eluded him his entire career.

forefront of the aerial revolution of the 1990s, and later a master of the so-called “main-event style”—able to put a crowd in the palm of his hand and keep it there.

## ACCOLADES

Y2J has won titles in four different countries and on both sides of the planet—including unifying the WWE and WCW World titles by defeating “Stone Cold” Steve Austin and The Rock *in a single evening*. He’s held a record nine Intercontinental titles, and five WWE tag team titles with five different partners. He’s also been TV champion in both ECW and WCW, and a four-time WCW cruiserweight champ. In Mexico, where he was known as “Corazon De Leon,” Jericho distinguished himself in both the WWA and the venerable CMLL, where he captured the NWA middleweight title (one of the oldest championships in the sport) and held it for nearly a year. In Japan, he first made a splash in Genichiro Tenryu’s WAR promotion 25 years ago. In 2018, he returned to “The Land Of The Rising Sun” to take IWGP’s Intercontinental title from Tetsuya Naito. Later, he memorably made Hiroshi Tanahashi tap out at Wrestle Kingdom 14.

## THE “IT” FACTOR

Charisma? Off the charts. Presence? Palpable. Mic skills?

Jericho is up there with the likes of Freddie Blassie, Superstar Billy Graham, Ric Flair, Roddy Piper, and Dusty Rhodes as one of the best talkers the business has ever seen. Plus, the guy is just entertaining and genuinely funny as hell.

But there was one all-important element missing from Chris Jericho’s formidable resume ... keeping him from being in the conversation for “The Greatest Of All Time.” Consider the men throughout wrestling history who are often cited as all-time greats—people like Frank Gotch, Ed “Strangler” Lewis, Jim Londos, Gorgeous George, Lou Thesz, Bruno Sammartino, Harley Race, Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, Shawn Michaels, Steve Austin, John Cena. They all, at a certain point in their careers, were considered the top man in the sport ... or at least the top man in a major wrestling promotion. And that’s something Manitoba’s favorite son had never quite pulled off.

Sure, he’s been a reliable main-event competitor for many years, and even a world champion. But no matter how high he climbed, that glass ceiling was always in place. Even as WWE World champ, Jericho was never quite the top man in the company, being overshadowed by the likes of Triple H, The Rock, and John

Cena. Even at his very best, he shared space with the likes of Edge, Randy Orton, Booker T, and others who were all enormously successful but couldn’t be described as the absolute top guy in the company. Jericho always seemed right on the cusp, always a proverbial bridesmaid and never a bride. That is, until now.

Since shocking the wrestling world with his 2019 announcement he was leaving WWE for AEW, Jericho has been on a tear unlike anything he’s ever accomplished in his career. From the launch of the company, “Le Champion” has positioned himself as the one to watch. His signing generated even more buzz than that of AEW founders Cody Rhodes, Kenny Omega, and The Young Bucks. Just when it seemed like his 30-year career was winding down, he found himself at the top of the totem pole like never before: becoming the first AEW World champion at All Out, then forming The Inner Circle.

The Inner Circle is fast becoming modern wrestling’s answer to The Four Horsemen, making Jericho the center of attention with his outrageous promos and antics. He’s shown a fire that hadn’t been seen from him in a long time. And, for the first time, he’s been not just a major player, but the *top* player. Champion or not, Jericho has embodied AEW since its inception.

For people who thought they’d seen it all from Jericho, it’s been an eye-opener. The man who seemed done with wrestling, who had enjoyed a career finer than most, has kicked things up about 10 notches and proven he was certainly not done. Chris Jericho is a greater star—and a more entertaining talent—than he has ever been. And so, at last, he can finally be considered among the all-time greats. □



# HOTSEAT

AN INCISIVE INTERVIEW WITH ONE OF THE SPORT'S TOP STARS



**CHARLOTTE  
FLAIR**

IT'S APPARENT EVERY time she steps into the ring that Charlotte Flair has picked up a lot from her old man. But she's learned one of the most valuable lessons about achieving success in pro wrestling on her own: how to tune out all the noise.

It's a skill that has served her well as some fickle fans have rejected WWE's "Queen," like they have many other top acts in recent years, including John Cena, Roman Reigns, and Seth Rollins. And it's been absolutely invaluable in recent months, as the COVID-19 outbreak has forced WWE stars to perform in front of largely empty houses, including at WrestleMania.

While other wrestlers have been clearly thrown off by the eerie silence that envelops almost every WWE match these days, Flair has appeared unfazed, continuing to rack up great performances (and title gold) throughout the pandemic. Although she lost her NXT Women's championship just three days after this interview, she quickly rebounded by establishing herself as a top contender to Asuka's Raw Women's title.

And after already cementing herself as one of the most successful female wrestlers in history, Flair has embraced another role in the sport, as one-half of one of the most successful wrestling power couples in history—along with her beau, Andrade, who has won titles on three different continents, with memorable reigns as WWE United States and NXT champion.

Does the 12-time Women's champion plan to put her career on hold, as Becky Lynch did, and start a family with "Manny," as she calls him? Or is there still plenty to do to equal (or surpass) the standards of wrestling excellence established by her pop? Flair recently discussed those topics and more with **PWI** Senior Writer Al Castle.



**Castle:** I imagine you've got a lot more time off than you usually do, right? Has it been a nice change of pace? I mean, the usual grind of working week-in, week-out—even if there's not all that much to do?

**Flair:** I've been going straight since I debuted in 2015. I've had one little window of six weeks off since then. But, for me, it's been enjoyable. Manny and I built a gym at our house. And with working on three brands—or even just Raw and NXT—it's been nice being in Orlando. That would probably have been difficult had I lived somewhere else and been full-time on the road. I have just enjoyed being at home with him.

**Castle:** As much as I know everybody wants to go back to normal, are there some changes in WWE's operations that have been forced over the last couple of months that you like, and that you think should stick around? Have you discovered anything that maybe would actually be an improvement?

**Flair:** What I think makes the company so special is our live events audience—the passionate fans, especially since we're global. But, as a performer, I've really taken this no-audience dilemma or circumstance, and I've just tried to grow as a performer. Like, going into WrestleMania, I just went, *How can I make myself stand out? How can I prove that I am that good? How can I make the audience at home forget that there is no audience at the Performance Center, and that we're not in an arena or*



**Charlotte Flair has put away countless opponents with her Figure-Eight leglock (a variation on her father Ric's figure-four), including poor Chelsea Green here.**

*stadium?* I've just tried to up my game in every way possible. So, for me, it's been like, wow ... this has been such a lesson. I feel like I've grown so much over these last few weeks. But I will say that I am excited to go back to live events, because it really is what makes our business so special. And to be able to control the emotions of an audience live ... I know I get to control the emotions of people at home, but I can't see the reactions. There's nothing better than an arena booing you.

**Castle:** When you're putting together a match and you're out there, how much is dictated by the reaction from fans? Certainly your dad has talked a lot over the years about how so much of the layout of his matches was in response to the fans—listening to them and going on that ride. Without them, how is the talent supposed to put on a match, much less a good match?

**Flair:** I think it's more about whether you, as a performer, can deal with the silence. Does it make you more nervous? Do you go too fast? Do you go too slow? Are you in your head? For me, whether there's been an audience or not ... because I've really had to learn, as a performer, when I've been put in roles that weren't necessarily fit for me. Like, when I'm a good guy, I've had to zone out. *Okay, yes, they're booing me, but that doesn't matter. I am playing my role as a good guy.* The last two weeks, we've had talent around the rings. But it's the performers that can put on a match and not be worried about the silence. I think that's harder, because you always want that instant gratification as a performer. Some wrestlers are like, "Oh, my gosh. Are they cheering? Are they not? Are they making noise? Are they not?" And, for me, I've been able

**"I don't care if there's one person or 101,000 people. You'll get the same Charlotte no matter what."**





**When Flair defeated Rhea Ripley for the NXT Women's title at this year's WrestleMania, she was thinking about the millions of fans watching at home ... not the empty Performance Center around her.**

to be so calm in my delivery, knowing that it doesn't bother me. I'm performing for the millions at home.

**Castle:** Do you think you got some preparation? Because the reality is, you have gotten a mixed reaction over the last couple of years, and a lot of fans have not always been on board. Did that experience help you focus on your job in the ring—not having that distraction of whether they're booing or cheering?

**Flair:** I came to the realization that when people aren't making noise, that's a problem. It's not that I'm more relaxed now because I'm not getting the reaction that I want. It's just I've come to the realization that, good, bad, or indifferent, this is me as a performer. It's the most confident I've been, I think, in a long time, just because I can just go out there like it was even before COVID. I can just go out there and be me. I don't have to say, "Oh my gosh, you like me?" or, "Oh my gosh, you hate me?" Whether you boo me or cheer me, this is me. And I've found that in my character now, which is the best part.

**Castle:** You've been a part of a lot of WrestleManias. You headlined WrestleMania last

year in New York in front of 82,000 fans. Did it feel like a WrestleMania this year? Were you able to get up for it like past WrestleManias?

**Flair:** It did for me. I had my new robe, my new gear ready to go. Because, to me, this was an opportunity to make people go, "Wow, that person stands out." And to think that it could have been the most-watched WrestleMania of all-time, because no other live sporting events were going on. I was thinking, *Whether there's an audience or not, you're going to remember my match. It's going to be the best.* Being able to show that gear change or that intensity without having a live audience. I felt for Rhea Ripley. This is her first WrestleMania. She's picturing Tampa Bay stadium, and I'm sure there were a lot of mixed emotions there. And yes, I've been on a WrestleMania. But, if you're going to stand out on any WrestleMania, stand out on a WrestleMania where all the odds are against you.

**Castle:** That's a good point. In that way, was this WrestleMania even more important for you than last year's?

**Flair:** The last two years have been a rollercoaster.

Yes, I'm always on TV, and that's due to how consistent I am. But in December, before the Royal Rumble, I was like, "Man, am I even going to be on WrestleMania?" So, when I won the Rumble, and I was going to be on WrestleMania, I said, "Once again, I'm going to show you know who is Miss WrestleMania." Regardless of storylines or whatever, I just wanted to stand out. And especially with this storyline with me challenging for the NXT title, I thought, *If this goes bad, it's on me.* It's her first WrestleMania. It's my, what? Fifth?

**Castle:** How receptive were you to this whole idea of moving to NXT? You talked about it being kind of a rollercoaster. Some folks would see that as sort of a demotion. You're moving down to the third brand, a developmental brand. Was any part of you reluctant to do it? Or did you see it as a challenge?

**Flair:** I don't look at anything as a demotion. I just look at it as: Here I am, full circle in my career. The fact that the NXT title was defended at WrestleMania still kind of blows my mind, because I went through those steps of going from FCW to NXT, from Tampa to Orlando. From having those first TakeOvers, traveling outside of Florida, to now you're telling me the NXT title is defended at WrestleMania? I took so much pride in that. For me, it was not looking at it just as, "Okay, you're going to NXT." It's like, "Okay NXT is now on USA. This is legitimately a third brand. And we have to treat it as a third equal brand."

**Castle:** Do you see your role as helping establish some of the newer, younger women there? It's so fascinating. I feel like it was just yesterday, you were the new thing. And now, here you are in that position of the veteran helping these other women.





Though her recent reign atop NXT was short, "The Queen" was more than happy to mix it up with new opponents like Rhea Ripley and Io Shirai.

**Flair:** I don't want to say that I've added more to NXT. I just hope that talent in that locker room at NXT go, "Okay, this woman is NXT, homegrown, and look at what she's done in her career." That's what I strive for. Do I add to the show? Do I add to the locker room? Am I getting them over yet? There's no right answer for that. I just hope the women in that locker room look at me and go, "She's done it all. And I want to do that, too. And what has it taken for her to do that?" And, for me, the one answer is consistency. Whether the storyline is for you or not for you, if you're a part of it, you shine no matter what.

**Castle:** I know there are some terrific women in NXT, world-traveled and very experienced. But there are also a lot of developmental talents that have a lot less experience than you and a lot of the women working on *Raw* and *Smackdown*. So what's your approach to working with them? Because I imagine it would be a little more of a challenge to get a real quality match out of somebody who's only been in the business maybe a year or two.

**Flair:** I think it's just going, "It doesn't matter how many moves

you know, it's about the story you portray and how you hold yourself." And if you learn anything in a ring with me, it's remember the story, and remember who you are as a character, because that's what really the audience connects with. They're not going to remember the 30,000<sup>th</sup> moonsault. They're going to remember how did that person make me feel? How did that talent make me feel? When I am with someone who doesn't have as much experience, it's just remembering

who they are and taking those moments in time. And it's more about that than, "Okay, how many moves are we going to do?"

**Castle:** Would you be up for doing some of those smaller shows that NXT typically runs when things go back to normal?

**Flair:** Oh, absolutely. Those are the most fun, because you get so up-close and personal with the audience ... or lack of. I don't care if there's one person or 101,000 people, like at WrestleMania 32. You'll get the same Charlotte no matter what.

**Castle:** One of the conversations coming out of this whole pandemic is reconsidering the role of live shows. There's been some speculation that maybe they don't come back, or they don't become as big a part of the business model as they have been before. What do you think of WWE becoming primarily a television business and house shows going away for the most part?

**Flair:** Then I guess it's just a matter of being grateful for what I was a part of with the house shows, and getting to travel the world with them, and then realizing that the company is evolving.



Charlotte Flair squared off against Becky Lynch and Ronda Rousey in the historic main event of WrestleMania 35. Next on her bucket list: headlining 'Mania in a one-on-one bout.





**In 2016, Flair faced Sasha Banks in the first-ever women's Hell in a Cell match. Now that the "Women's Evolution" is a few years behind her, she hopes to be the most compelling performer on any show, regardless of gender.**

And you have to evolve, as well. If it's more of a televised product, then I'm just as grateful to be able to do my craft in front of the audience at home.

**Castle:** Speaking of evolutions, it was a couple of years ago that we were really in the thick of the "Women's Evolution." It sort of feels like we're on the other side of it now. The novelty has worn off women headlining a pay-per-view or competing in the Royal Rumble. Are you happy with where things have settled with women's wrestling?

**Flair:** I won't be happy until I main event WrestleMania again ... in a singles match.

**Castle:** Is the distinction there being part of a triple threat match with a mainstream attraction like Ronda Rousey, versus just two full-time performers working together?

**Flair:** No, I mean, I don't think there's a distinction. It's just that it's my goal to have a one-on-one

with storylines. Whether it's main-eventing pay-per-views or not, I feel like it's so far past that.

**Castle:** What do you think about where some of the other

main event at WrestleMania. But, in terms of the "Women's Evolution," I think everything is always on a rollercoaster. And it always has to be the right story, the right place, the right time. And whoever has the best story at that time deserves the main event at WrestleMania. But I think we are on the other side of that evolution, where it just really depends on who has the hottest story. I don't feel like there's any difference in the men and women

companies have taken women's wrestling? Here in the United States, you have a company that had a trans woman as its women's champion (Nyla Rose). Impact has a woman as its heavyweight champion (Tessa Blanchard), wrestling men. Are these ideas that you think can work in WWE?

**Flair:** I just think that anywhere women are succeeding, or one female is succeeding, we're all succeeding. I'm proud of everything that women are doing all over the world and in other companies.

**Castle:** You touched on this cool gym that you and Manny bought. What's it been like to have a little piece of home with you on the road? I imagine it makes your lifestyle a lot better when you're not away from your loved one for days at a time. He's with you.

**Flair:** Yeah. I'm smiling right now. It's been amazing this year, having someone to share my journey with. I was on the road, I guess, what, almost four or five years alone? And to be



**At the end of WrestleMania 36, Charlotte Flair, Bayley, and Becky Lynch would each hold the Women's title for one of WWE's three brands. Five years earlier, they were three fresh-faced NXT standouts looking to catch their big break on the main roster.**

PHOTO BY STU SAKS



able to travel with your partner, who understands the pressures and the ups and downs. Understanding what you do, I think that's the hardest thing. No one can explain what road life is like. And yeah, it's very nice having someone to travel with.

**Castle:** Does it add pressure, in the sense that typically superstars are concerned with their own career, their own trajectory? In this case, I imagine, you're sort of doubling that pressure because you're also concerned about how he's doing.

**Flair:** I just get anxiety. I'm used to being criticized because of my last name. I just never want that for Manny. Being attached to my dad or the Flair name, that's what I'm more worried about. I mean, I guess the only time I get more frustrated is because I know how talented he is, and that he's a star, and I just want so much more for him, for his future. But that's, I think, my biggest concern. I'm used to people having negative things to say. I just hate that my last name gets put on him. That's my biggest anxiety.

**Castle:** I'm a big fan of his, dating back to that incredible match he had in NXT with Johnny Gargano. What do you see as his upside? Do you see him headlining WrestleMania right next to you one day?

**Flair:** Oh, 1,000%. For Manny, I think it's just going to take the right storyline. He's been on the road two years. And, with the guys, it's more competitive, because there's more of them. I know that's a dream of his. I think the one thing that sets him apart from other talent who come from different countries or from the independents is that he understands the style of WWE, and how different it is, and his role of playing the bad guy. And—we don't have them anymore—but being able to listen to



Away from the ring, Flair has found the perfect partner in fellow WWE star Andrade. The two have become one of wrestling's most talked about power couples.

a crowd when we did have live events. I've learned so much from watching him. Like hell ... he critiques me all the time. You have no idea. He teaches me how to be able to listen to an audience, and how to react, and how to get those reactions.

**Castle:** We saw Becky Lynch a few weeks ago announce her pregnancy and take some time away. Seeing that up close, does it get you thinking about that proverbial ticking clock? Or is that not in the cards for you?

**Flair:** I very much like to be in control. And, if I already started thinking now, like, *Wait, what's my clock? Am I going to have babies? Am I too old? What's going to happen? Do we have to have kids next year?* I'll drive myself crazy. I still have goals, and I still have things that I want to do within WWE. If I put that added pressure on myself, I might explode.

**Castle:** Is it something that's looming in the background? Because, whether you want to acknowledge the clock is there, just physiologically, you're probably not going to start a family at 50.

**Flair:** I think having the opportunity to wrestle Trish Stratus at SummerSlam, and her having two babies at her age and being able to come back on one of the big four pay-per-views made me go, "If I want to have babies and come back at any time, I can." I think that's the one thing. The positive from it all is you see women like Brie Bella. You see Trish Stratus. You see Tamina, Asuka—many women who aren't really talked about being mothers who are mothers. Lacey Evans. I just go, "Okay, there's not that added pressure." But, if I woke up tomorrow and I was like, "Manny, I want babies," I know he'd be 100% behind me. □

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# WHAT THE HECK IS WRONG WITH MJF?

OUR RESIDENT PSYCHOLOGIST ANALYZES  
AEW'S MOST HATED MAN

*We've been kicking around doing a story on Maxwell Jacob Friedman for a while, but it's not an assignment we wanted to give just any reporter. After all, the All Elite Wrestling star isn't exactly the most pleasant interview—he's brash, arrogant, and often downright hostile to journalists.*

*Admittedly, Friedman has some room to brag. In less than five years, the 24-year-old's won AEW's Dynamite Diamond Ring, multiple championships for MLW and CZW, and a host of other titles. Still, it was going to be tough to get beneath the surface and figure out the "why" of it all: Why does MJF continually insult people? Why did he turn on his supposed best friend, Cody Rhodes? Why, frankly, is he such a jerk?*

*For decades, Dr. Sidney Basil has served as our resident wrestling psychologist. Whenever we were dealing with a wrestler whose behavior befuddled even us, Dr. Sid was the one we'd call. While he hasn't done any analysis for us in many years, he seemed like the perfect person to get to the center of whatever is going on with MJF.*

**I**N ALL MY years of interviewing wrestlers for *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, Maxwell Jacob Friedman is the most antagonistic, contradictory, and frustrating individual I've ever encountered. I don't say that lightly—or with any pleasure—but it's true.

Friedman is clearly an intelligent young man who has achieved much in a relatively short period of time. Throughout our conversation, he reminded me multiple times that he was undefeated in singles competition for All Elite Wrestling. He seemed particularly proud of his victory over his former friend, Cody Rhodes, at AEW's Revolution pay-per-view. This felt like an appropriate place to start our conversation.

**BASIL:** You talked about how it was a relief to be rid of Cody Rhodes. It was pretty obvious you two were friends at one point. What changed?

**MJF:** What changed was Cody. Turned out he was a complete maniacal sociopath. I'm sure you'd know a lot about that word since you're a doctor, right? He tried to claim he was my mentor, when, in reality, all he wanted to do was have me in his shadow.



TEXT BY  
DR. SIDNEY M. BASIL



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



PHOTO BY SCOTT LESH/AEW

On the October 9, 2019, premiere of *Dynamite*, MJF was Cody Rhodes' number-one cheerleader [above]. A mere month later, Friedman let his bodyguard, Wardlow, choke out his former friend [right].



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



MJF has found a new ally in the 6'2", 267-pound Wardlow. "He's my protege, and I trust him," Friedman said. "And Wardlow should trust me, absolutely, because I care about that young man with all my heart." When I questioned this statement, Friedman became defensive.

he'd never truly wanted for anything.

"I only had three or four cleaning ladies in my wing of the house," he lamented. "Sometimes, I felt I didn't have nearly as many toys as I deserved. Sometimes, I felt that my horses were not fed properly, or I wasn't given the proper breed of horses."

**BASIL:** It's interesting you bring up Wardlow. Considering what happened with Cody, why should he trust you?

**MJF:** What is that supposed to mean, Doctor?

**BASIL:** Why would he believe that you—

**MJF:** How about I cut you off right there, Doctor Dip\*\*\*\*? I don't know where you get off. I don't trust anyone on this planet more than I trust Wardlow, and he never has anything to worry about when it comes to his friendship with MJF.

I mentioned that I'd noticed a pattern with MJF when it came to his inability to maintain lasting friendships. He admitted this had been the case his entire life. "My friends always seem to turn on me, and I never understand why," he said. "I mean, I'm a great guy. I'm funny, I'm handsome, I'm salt of the earth. I bring a lot to the table."

In my view, it's highly unlikely MJF's friends abandoned him for no reason. While he loathes his rivals, he's equally contemptuous of those who are kind to him. I asked him about his boyhood appearance on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, where a cheerful, six-year-old Maxwell Friedman sang "You Are My Sunshine" (a clip that went viral last year). He did not hold fond memories.

"Rosie O'Donnell used me, just like most people in my life," he said. "She had me sing on her show ... beautifully, I might add. And was I compensated for that, Doctor? No, I was not."

I sensed childhood wounds we needed to explore further. But when I pressed Friedman about his experiences growing up in Plainview, New York, it was clear



Into adulthood, MJF remained privileged. He revealed his father gave him “a small loan of \$1-million” after high school. “Most people wouldn’t know what to do with such a small amount of money,” he said. “But I made myself into the man I am today, and I’m really proud of that.”

The conversation turned to Friedman’s constant assertion that he is superior to everyone else. (His catchphrase is, literally, “I’m better than you, and you know it.”)

Friedman shows utter disdain for his colleagues—even those who’ve done no wrong by him, like Kip Sabian. Dr. Basil notes MJF’s lifelong pattern of antisocial and selfish behavior.

**BASIL:** From my experience, when someone brags about themselves, a lot of times it comes from a place of insecurity. Did something happen to you along the way that made you—

**MJF:** No, no, no. I’m not insecure. I am the least insecure. I don’t even know what that word means. Sir, if I may ask real quick, from where did you get your doctorate?

**BASIL:** The University of Pennsylvania.

**MJF:** Got it. You’re a quack. And, to be frank, Penn, as everyone is aware of in high society, is the least important Ivy League school. There’s nothing insecure about me. How can someone who’s undefeated, who’s a prodigy of this sport, who is as handsome as me, possibly be insecure?

Friedman attempted to frame himself as a classic good guy. “I think what’s important is being a positive role model to young kids out there who might not be getting their fair shake,” he said. “They just need a hero ... a good, old-fashioned American hero.”

In almost the same breath, MJF brushed off my reminder that he bullied fans on social media, insisting that those fans always attacked him first. “Think before you use your little chubby fingers on your Twitter machines,” he warned.

The contradictions in MJF’s speech reflect an incredible hubris, along with a profound absence of self-awareness. He lacks empathy while demanding the adulation of others. Despite referring to Cody Rhodes as a “maniacal sociopath” earlier in our interview, Friedman himself exhibits all the signs of a textbook narcissistic sociopath. Nevertheless, it’s clear he’s intent on silencing his critics.

**BASIL:** What are your goals for the next year in AEW?

**MJF:** I’m going to become World champion. I want to not only be a top guy in my industry, present-day, I’d like to make it very clear I am the greatest of all time. I want to be put on the Mount Rushmore of wrestling when this is all said and done. Do I think I can accomplish that in one year? Yeah, probably.

I sincerely hope MJF considers talk therapy to work through his numerous psychological issues ... for his sake, as well as for those close to him. □

MJF is a series of contradictions: a braggart who fashions himself humble, and a despicable villain who wonders why fans don’t like him. Dr. Sid hopes the young grappler will seek therapy in the future.



# WHO IS ALEISTER BLACK, REALLY?

**“THE DUTCH DESTROYER” PEELS BACK  
THE CURTAIN ON HIS DARK PERSONA**

TEXT BY BRIAN SOLOMON


**I**N AN EARLIER time, the pro wrestling landscape was populated by individuals who projected an ominous, almost satanic persona they embraced and lived 24/7, striking terror in fans who never knew where fantasy ended and reality began. Men like Kevin Sullivan, Abdullah the Butcher, The Sheik, and The Great Mephisto truly “lived their gimmick,” never letting people see behind the proverbial curtain. But in the modern age of wrestling—with the internet, social media, and a savvier fan base—such things aren’t possible anymore. Today’s grapplers must generate mystery and allure while also not insulting fans’ intelligence.

Of all the modern performers juggling these dueling concerns, one of the most effective is Aleister Black, known to his par-

ents as Tom Budgen. A self-professed enigma, Black cuts an imposing figure on WWE TV, with his candle-lit, death metal ring entrance, tattoo-covered physique, and stoic visage. Those bells and whistles surely inspire almost as much fear in his opponents as his ability to decimate them with various kicks, knee strikes, and flying attacks.

Yet fans who follow him away from the ring are given access to the other side of Aleister Black—the reserved, charitable animal-lover who also happens to be married to the beautiful Raw manager Zelina Vega. Though, in days gone by, such revelations might have been seen as “exposing the business,” Black pulls it all off perfectly ... and ranks among WWE’s most popular stars.





**ONSCREEN, HE'S FOREBODING ... MAYBE EVEN  
SINISTER. BUT HOW MUCH OF THIS DARKNESS  
FOLLOWS HIM HOME AFTER THE SHOW? RAW'S MOST  
MYSTERIOUS SUPERSTAR GIVES *PWI* READERS A RARE  
GLIMPSE AT THE REAL ALEISTER BLACK.**







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Aleister Black clobbers Seth Rollins with a running knee strike. Just as he likes to catch his opponents by surprise, so, too, does the Amsterdam native strive to keep fans guessing.

approach—taking fan rumors in stride and turning them on their ear.

“I’m not a Satanist,” he said. “But, at the same time, people think Satanism ties into devil worship. The word ‘Satanism’ is actually an ironic term. It teaches you about you as a human being, but it has nothing to do with worshipping the devil, which surprises people. A lot of people will throw that at me, that

I’m a Satanist. No, but now I’m going to do things that make you think I am!”

This approach falls in line with Black’s desire to keep fans on their toes, always wondering what he’s really all about ... and what he may do next.

“I think of Aleister Black as some kind of conspiracy,” he said. “I’ll use things fans think he is trying to represent, and I’ll throw them out there very subtly to see if they’ll go, ‘See, I knew it!’ or ‘Wait, what is

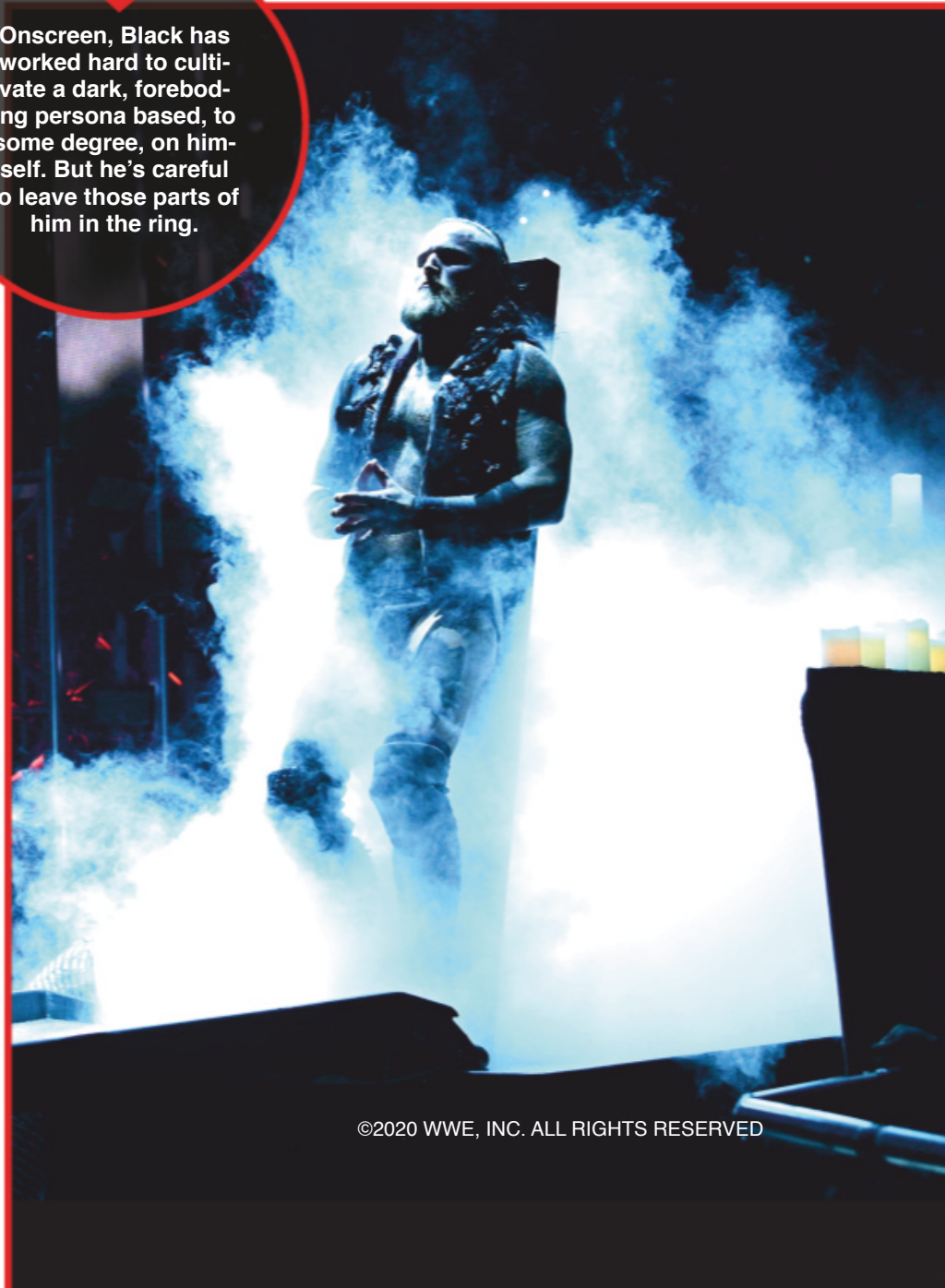
“We live in a different day and age,” Black explained. “I do a good enough job to protect my character, but not to the point where it’s ludicrous, where people think there is no other persona but Aleister Black, and he is 100 percent me. That might come across as a little unhealthy, and I don’t think that works today.”

But the presence Black brings to WWE rings is, in a few crucial ways, not so different from the man he is in everyday life. In developing his persona, “The Dutch Destroyer” made an effort to distill his most valuable qualities, even turning to family members and trusted friends to see if it rang true to them. The result is a dark, mysterious character who contains all the fire and passion of the man behind it—with hints of the quieter, more introspective person he is off-screen.

“There are a lot of similarities between Aleister Black and myself. And there has to be, or it wouldn’t be relatable,” he admits. “I’m a bit of a recluse, and I think Aleister Black has a lot of that in him. But there’s also the explosiveness of going from zero to 100 in a split-second. That’s a personality trait I have; I can get really high-energy real quick. I also had to look at my flaws. Not everything has to be flawless, because you can’t relate to something that’s perfect.”

Part of this complex persona grew from a lifelong fascination with occult religions, which the former NXT champ attributes to “somewhat traumatic childhood experiences.” And, just as with other wrestlers who portrayed dark characters, the Amsterdam native has dealt with often unfounded and unfair assumptions from fans. But while Kevin Sullivan deflected accusations of Satanism by pointing to his real-life Roman Catholicism, Black favors a more mysterious

Onscreen, Black has worked hard to cultivate a dark, foreboding persona based, to some degree, on himself. But he’s careful to leave those parts of him in the ring.



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he doing?’ I try to bait them into what I want them to think.”

And yet, as those who follow Black closely may already know, there is a lot more to him than what is seen on television. This is a man with a very giving nature, who donates much of his money to charity and doesn’t eat meat. He avoids speaking out on social or political matters, preferring to keep to himself and spend quality time with his lovely wife, both on the road and at home. Black may be a foreboding presence on WWE TV, but he also makes sure to leave work at work. He said, “If you need any proof that I don’t take myself too seriously, I have an Instagram for my cats!”

Those so inclined may follow the exploits of Totty Potato, Tubby, Pickles, Phoebe, Willow, and Betty on Instagram: @team\_pomato. If you do, you’ll see for yourself how devoted Black

The Black Mass kick can strike at any time, as Buddy Murphy learned the hard way.



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is to his feline friends. You’ll also catch a decidedly more cuddly side of “The Dutch Destroyer,” who is most certainly not always what he seems.

When asked to reconcile his dark character with this off-screen cat fixation, the master of the Black Mass kick seems characteristically zen.

“There’s something very strange about cats. I find them hilarious. Not a day’s gone by when they haven’t taught me something about myself, or about them,” Black said. “Dogs will let you know straight off the bat if something is wrong with them. With cats, you almost have to give them an interrogation, take them to the vet, and have them completely examined

from top to bottom. They’re not as expressive as dogs; they’re kind of mysterious. They have their own way of showing you they love you. It’s a much more subtle love.”

It seems oddly appropriate that an enigmatic, yet graceful competitor like Black would be so fond of cats. On the other hand, it’s hard to imagine The Sheik or The Great Mephisto cuddling up to a bevy of cute little kitties. But if anyone embodies how the business has evolved over the years, it’s Aleister Black.

“I feel like I’m a perfect mix between the old-school fundamentals and the new-school style of pro wrestling,” he said. “There was no wrestling in the Netherlands [when I started]. My friend and I started Pro Wrestling Holland so we could have a home base. I like to think that I’m the textbook example of how if you follow your dreams long enough, you can do what you set out to do.”

When all’s said and done, Black looks to have those two simultaneous things that have often eluded many prominent grapplers: a long, successful career, matched by an equally happy, peaceful home life. □

Away from the squared circle, Black is content to spend quiet time at home with his wife and cats. While they’ve been at odds on camera, he and Zelina Vega are happily married off-screen.



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



# THE 2020 PWI POLL

## WRESTLING'S HOTTEST QUESTIONS ANSWERED

SECTION COMPILED BY AL CASTLE

**T**HE 50 QUESTIONS that were expected to comprise this year's *PWI* Poll had been chosen, written up, and were ready to go out to our panel of subscribers when the world changed.

Each year, the *PWI* Poll attempts to pose questions that reflect the state of professional wrestling at the time the poll is taken. As such, it was critical that this year's slate of inquiries captured the far-reaching ramifications of the COVID-19 outbreak on the sport.

From the prospect of wrestling fans risking their lives by attending events to the reality of some wrestlers losing their livelihoods because of the financial impact of the pandemic, the coronavirus has prompted questions that nobody could have anticipated a year ago.

Among them: Was WWE right to put on WrestleMania 36 despite the potential dangers to its wrestlers and staff? Should states have considered pro wrestling among the "essential" businesses allowed to continue operating

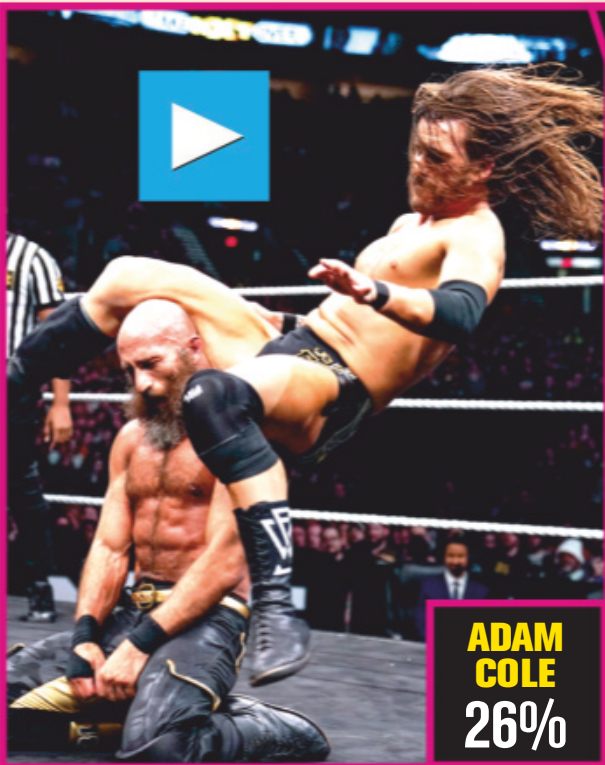
throughout the pandemic, as Florida did? And, more innocuously, what do fans make of the emergence of "cinematic" wrestling matches that rely on production tricks, rather than crowd reaction, for drama?

*Pro Wrestling Illustrated* posed those questions, and 47 others, to a random sampling of 250 *PWI* subscribers (including print and digital subscribers) who received an email inviting them to have their voices heard in the 2020 *PWI* Poll.

The panel represents a cross-section of fans from different age groups, backgrounds, and continents—all sharing a love for the thrilling, often bizarre pastime of pro wrestling.

And although world events influenced some of our questions this year, we were sure to leave plenty of space for some old staples of the *PWI* Poll. Who has the most devastating finisher? Who is the best brawler? What are wrestling's most prestigious championships? Read on to find out.





## 1. WHO IS, POUND FOR POUND, THE BEST MALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?

That NXT's longest-reigning champion is also one of its smallest speaks to the wealth of talent possessed by Cole. Passing one year as champion on June 1, Cole's work ethic has been unparalleled, and he seems to get better with every outing. His inspired performance in the weeks leading up to Survivor Series weekend—when he was wrestling on *Raw*, *Smackdown*, and *NXT*, and defended his title at the pay-per-view—may have secured him this spot. Similarly, Ospreay has transcended New Japan's junior heavyweight division and is now recognized as one of the very best in any weight class. Although Bryan's taken a step or two back from the main event, fans still recognize his ability to put on a master class in the ring, even against opponents with far less experience in the spotlight. And while Okada, Styles, and Omega may all have slipped a notch from their career peaks a couple of years ago, surveyed readers believe that they remain in an elite class.

WILL OSPREAY  
DANIEL BRYAN  
KAZUCHIKA OKADA

19%  
17%  
15%

AJ STYLES  
KENNY OMEGA  
OTHERS

8%  
7%  
8%

## 2. WHO IS, POUND FOR POUND, THE BEST FEMALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?

Given she's only the second woman to hold the top title of a televised American wrestling promotion, it would be tough for anyone to beat Blanchard in this category. Even while giving up more than 100 pounds to male opponents like Brian Cage and Sami Callihan, Blanchard has given up nothing when it comes to skill and credibility against challengers of any gender. Lynch has been one of the most dominant forces in WWE women's history, after surpassing the one-year mark as *Raw* champion and only finally relinquishing the title due to pregnancy. And in her 133-day reign as AEW's first Women's champ, Riho proved big things can come in small packages. WWE talent rounds out the rest of the top vote-getters, suggesting AEW still has some catching up to do when it comes to developing a credible women's division.

BECKY LYNCH  
RIHO  
SHAYNA BASZLER

19%  
17%  
11%

ASUKA  
CHARLOTTE  
RHEA RIPLEY

8%  
7%  
5%

OTHERS

9%

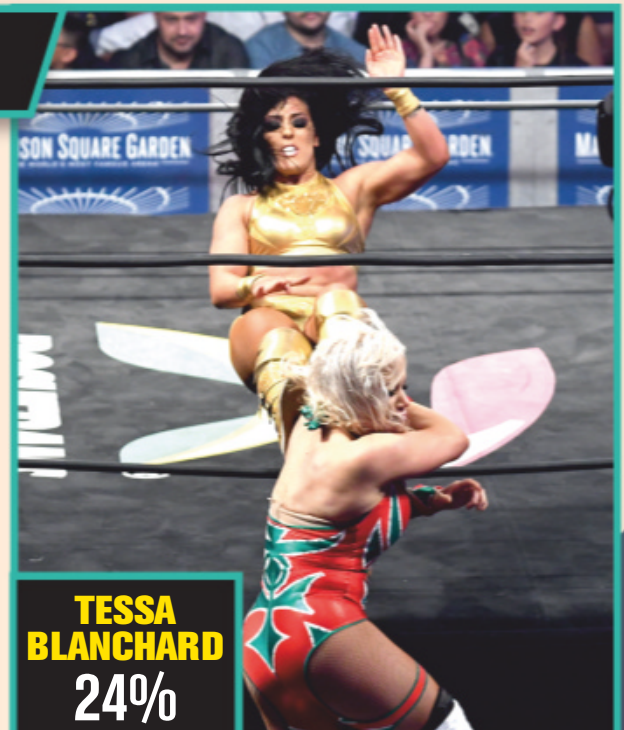
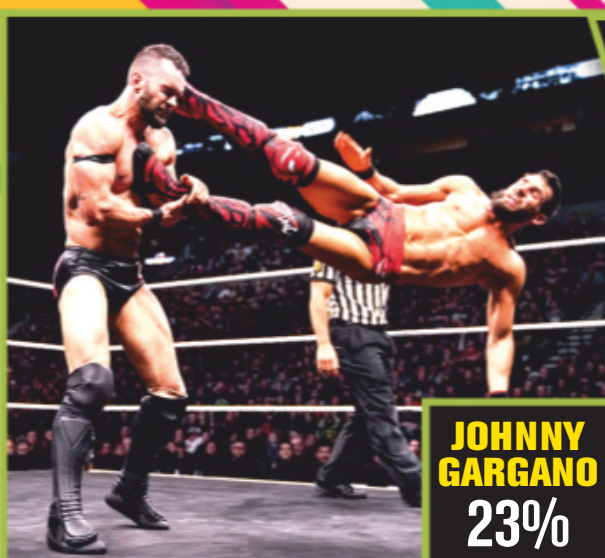


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



## 3. IF YOU COULD WATCH THE MATCHES OF ONLY ONE ACTIVE WRESTLER, WHOM WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

The man who has been dubbed "Johnny Takeover" seems incapable of having a bad match, and can usually be relied on for epic ones. His series of showdowns with Tommaso Ciampa and Cole largely carried NXT's biggest cards for the last three years. Cole, his dancing partner for a lot of those classics, has also shown a knack for having exciting matches against a range of opponents. Poll respondents seemed to appreciate Rhodes' storytelling ability in the ring, as evidenced in his dramatic clashes against Chris Jericho and MJF. After having some of the greatest matches in history against one another, Okada and Omega can still be counted on to have very good bouts with just about anyone.

ADAM COLE  
CODY RHODES  
KAZUCHIKA OKADA

20%  
17%  
12%

KENNY OMEGA  
BECKY LYNCH  
DANIEL BRYAN

8%  
6%  
6%

OTHERS

8%



4. IS WRESTLING BETTER OR WORSE THAN IT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO?

Panelists were largely united on this one, and it's hard to disagree. Back in 2015, WWE was, for the most part, the only game in town when it came to big-league pro wrestling in the U.S. If you wanted production value, packed arenas, and primetime television—but not necessarily Roman Reigns in your main event—your options were few. Five years later, and for the first time since WCW folded nearly 20 years ago, American wrestling fans have a viable alternative to WWE in the form of AEW, which has the star power and production value that fans have come to expect in their televised wrestling, but also showcases a more progressive presentation than WWE often does. What's more, the competitive landscape has pushed promoters and wrestlers alike to bring their A-games. NXT, which was still little more than WWE's minor league system five years ago, is now on primetime television each week. And advancements in digital and social media have given American fans easier access to other wrestling companies from around the world.

BETTER

91% WORSE

9%



PHOTO BY JAMES MUSSELWHITE/AEW

BETTER  
91%

5. RANK THE FIVE MOST PRESTIGIOUS CHAMPIONSHIPS IN THE WORLD.

The championship held by the likes of Bruno Sammartino, Hulk Hogan, and Steve Austin—and now around the waist of Drew McIntyre—remains the holy grail in the eyes of most wrestling fans. And WWE's Universal championship, which is worn these days by Braun Strowman over on Smackdown, isn't far behind, having also been included in every completed survey. New Japan's top prize, currently worn by Tetsuya Naito, has long been respected by fans ... and last year was finally recognized as a world title by *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. Although the vast majority of fans are already sold on the prestige of AEW's World title, a few appear reluctant to put too much weight into a title that hadn't celebrated its first birthday when the poll was conducted. And, although it's technically associated with WWE's developmental brand, the elite wrestlers who have worn the NXT championship have elevated it to a near-top-tier title.

**Note:** Results reflect the percentage of times each championship was named among a panelist's top five choices. Percentage totals in this category do not equal 100.



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WWE HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE  
100%

WWE HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE  
WWE UNIVERSAL TITLE  
NEW JAPAN IWGP TITLE

100% AEW WORLD TITLE  
100% NXT HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE  
90%

80%  
70%

6. WHAT IS WRESTLING'S MOST DEVASTATING FINISHING MANEUVER?

Chris Jericho didn't just reinvent himself when he joined AEW—he reinvented his finisher, too. And the devastating spinning back elbow he came up with has knocked silly most everyone who has been on the receiving end. But it was the Paradigm Shift—previously known as “Dirty Deeds”—that was able to take down Jericho, and win Jon Moxley the AEW title. Randy Orton's long-feared RKO has made something of a comeback in recent months. Just ask Beth Phoenix. As for who has the most devastating kick in the sport, WWE champion Drew McIntyre beat out Aleister Black among our panelists. Lest his feelings get hurt, Sheamus' “Brogue Kick” earned a few votes, as well.

PARADIGM SHIFT DDT 19% RAINMAKER 11%  
RKO 18% ONE-WINGED ANGEL 11%  
CLAYMORE KICK 12% OTHERS 8%

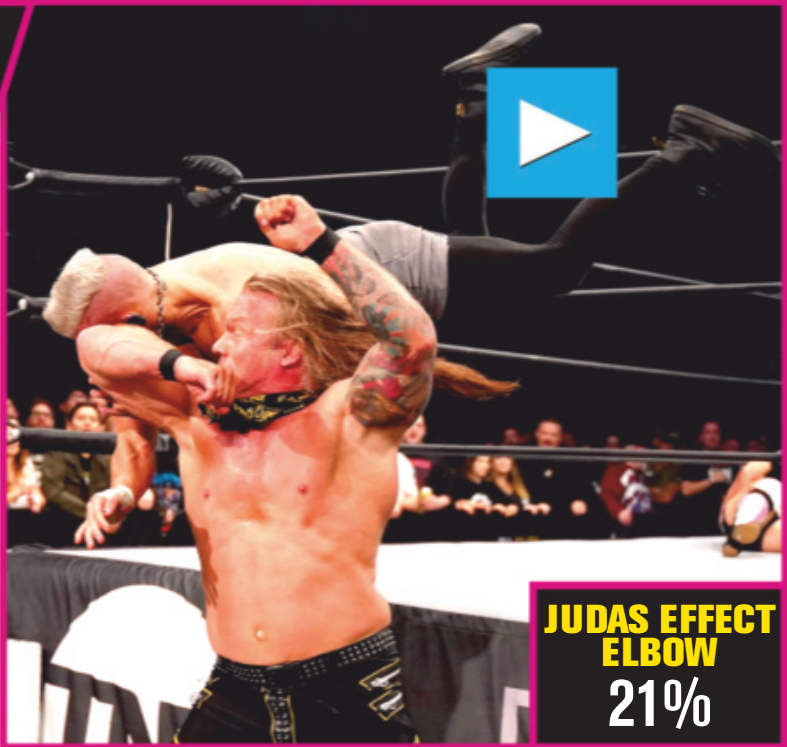
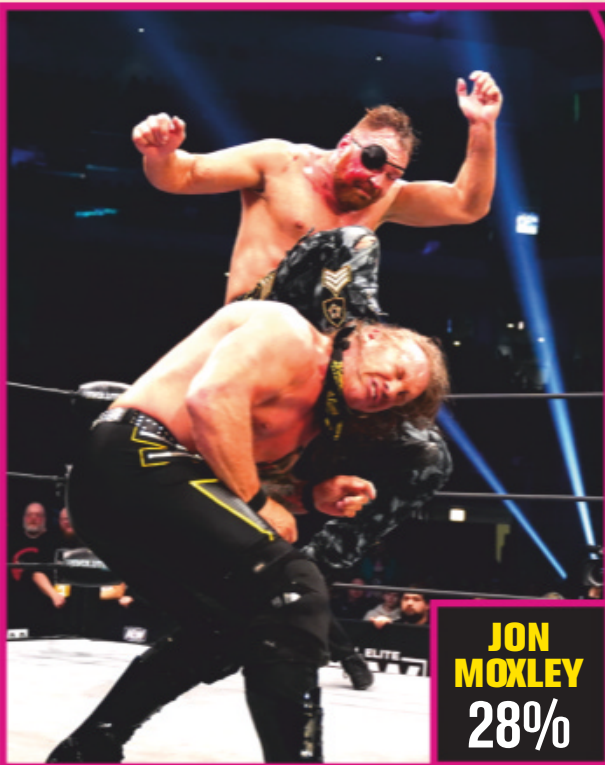


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

JUDAS EFFECT  
ELBOW  
21%



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW


**JON  
MOXLEY**  
28%

## 7. WHO IS THE BEST MALE BRAWLER?

It may not have been every wrestling fan's cup of tea, but Moxley's victory over Kenny Omega in AEW's insane, unsanctioned "lights out" match at Full Gear helped cement his place as wrestling's preeminent brawler. The man that Moxley beat for the AEW World title, Chris Jericho, also fared well in the poll. Closing in on 50, Jericho has transformed his once high-flying style into a more methodical and sadistic one, and it's borne fruit. NJPW's Ishii is another seasoned veteran whose brutality is being appreciated by a new generation of fans. Over at Impact, Callihan's violent wrestling style is often revolting, but it's hard to argue with the results, which included a heavyweight title run. And two years after WALTER and PCO had a memorable war at Joey Janela's Spring Break show over WrestleMania 34 weekend, both men have parlayed their brawling styles into heavyweight championships.

 CHRIS JERICHO  
TOMOHIRO ISHII  
SAMI CALLIHAN

 24%  
14%  
10%

 WALTER  
PCO  
OTHERS

 9%  
8%  
7%

## 8. WHO IS THE BEST FEMALE BRAWLER?

Before capturing the Raw Women's title at Money in the Bank, Asuka seemed to have lost her footing as a singles wrestler. But poll respondents still appreciated her viciousness in the ring, which has only been escalated with the addition of the green mist she spits on opponents. Though newly on the radar of many fans, AEW Women's champion Rose made an impression on our panel with her size and brutality. Former Women's champion Lynch is more than capable of holding her own against mat technicians and aerialists, but also feels right at home in the kind of brawl that might break out in the pubs of her hometown of Dublin, Ireland. Some panelists were introduced to Kai's brand of savagery in the first women's War Games, when she turned on Tegan Nox and took her friend out of the match before she could enter it.


**ASUKA**  
24%

 NYLA ROSE  
BECKY LYNCH  
DAKOTA KAI

 23%  
21%  
9%

 SHAYNA BASZLER  
THUNDER ROSA  
OTHERS

 6%  
5%  
12%

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PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW


**REY  
FENIX**  
25%

## 9. WHO IS THE BEST MALE AERIALIST?

International stars stood out in this category. In a crowded field of masked lucha libre daredevils—including his own brother, Pentagon Jr.—Rey Fenix has developed a particularly death-defying (and gravity-defying) style, including his signature 450 splash. Ospreay has dropped jaws on multiple continents with his crisp and graceful offense, which includes a picture-perfect handspring enzuigiri kick. Although his stock has dropped considerably in WWE in recent months, fans still recognize Ricochet as one of the pioneers of the modern aerial style, and his showing here is a testament to that fact. Nick and Matt Jackson continue to innovate, as evidenced in their breathtaking performance against Adam Page and Kenny Omega at AEW's Revolution pay-per-view in February. And panelists seemed to indicate that ROH was wise in signing Mexico's Bandido, who makes magic every time he climbs to the top rope.

 WILL OSPREAY  
RICOCHET  
YOUNG BUCKS

 23%  
20%  
11%

 HIROMU TAKAHASHI  
BANDIDO  
OTHERS

 6%  
5%  
10%



10. WHO IS THE BEST FEMALE AERIALIST?

Aptly dubbed the “Genius Of The Sky,” NXT’s Io Shirai has long been revered for her high-flying ability. And she has more recently won over mainstream American fans, including those on our panel. Even since embracing her mean streak, Shirai can still dazzle fans with her grace, including when executing one of the best moonsaults in the sport. The pint-sized Riho similarly had earned acclaim among Japan’s “joshi” women’s wrestling community long before she began turning heads in AEW with her lightning-fast style. Although she’s been somewhat hidden by WWE’s women’s tag team division, Sane’s aerial ability was well established among poll voters. While considerably larger than some of the other women on this list, Charlotte Flair’s roots in gymnastics shine through in her matches. Giving Flair a run for her money as one of the best pure athletes in WWE’s women’s division is Belair, who had a strong showing in this category.

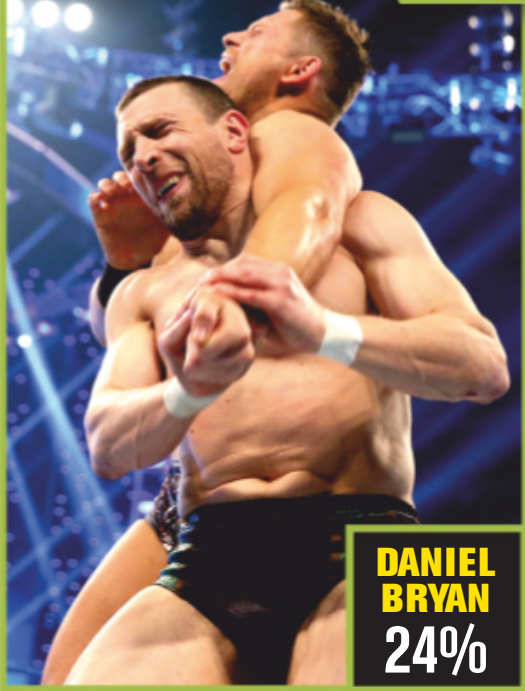
RIHO	18%	CHARLOTTE FLAIR	14%	KRIS STATLANDER	6%	OTHERS	8%
KAIRI SANE	17%	BIANCA BELAIR	10%	MAYU IWATANI	6%		



IO SHIRAI  
21%

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11. WHO IS THE BEST MALE TECHNICAL WRESTLER?



DANIEL  
BRYAN  
24%

Ironically, it may have been Bryan’s descent through the ranks in WWE that reminded some fans of his technical mastery. It was in matches against hand-picked opponents like Gulak (who also had a strong showing here) that Bryan was able to show off the grappling skills that first made him a sensation on the independents. Meanwhile, Sabre Jr. has developed a mat-based style unto itself. He’s showcased it brilliantly as of late, including in matches against Will Ospreay and Sanada. Twenty years after making his wrestling debut, Strong continues to put on wrestling clinics in NXT, and, somehow, continually comes up with new ways to execute a backbreaker. Riddle and Dunne—who have teamed as the “BroserWeights” to take on Strong and his Undisputed Era cronies—both earned several votes. And fully one-tenth of voters have taken notice of ROH’s Jonathan Gresham, who may lack flash, but more than makes up for it in technique.

ZACK SABRE JR.	21%	MATT RIDDLE	9%	OTHERS	9%
RODERICK STRONG	16%	PETE DUNNE	6%		
JONATHAN GRESHAM	10%	DREW GULAK	5%		

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12. WHO IS THE BEST FEMALE TECHNICAL WRESTLER?

Though still a relative newcomer to pro wrestling, Baszler has incorporated the grappling skills she developed over her years as a mixed martial artist to create a hybrid style that is tough for opponents to figure out. The “Submission Magician” can contort an opponent’s limbs in countless excruciating ways and then finish them off with her Kirifuda Clutch. As a testament to what a well-rounded competitor Asuka is, nearly as many voters picked her as wrestling’s best female technician as they did best brawler. Proving that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, Tessa Blanchard has carved out a reputation as a fine technical wrestler, just as her father, Tully, did before she was even born. World of Stardom champion Iwatani is known as the “Sky Blue Hyper Technician”—with an emphasis on “technician.”

ASUKA	21%	HIKARU SHIDA	6%	OTHERS	6%
TESSA BLANCHARD	17%	LEYLA HIRSCH	5%		
MAYU IWATANI	15%	JORDYNNE GRACE	4%		



SHAYNA  
BASZLER  
26%

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



PHOTO BY STU SAKS

**ALEISTER  
BLACK**  
**25%**


### 13. WHICH WRESTLER CURRENTLY WITH RAW WILL BE THE NEXT TO BECOME A MAJOR STAR?

Although it's been especially challenging for any WWE wrestler to break through as of late without any fans in the building to cheer them on, our panel was still able to deduce who they thought was on the fast track to success. At the top of that list was Black, a former NXT champion who has earned considerable TV time as of late. With a unique look and an exciting ring style, Black may find that the one knocking on his door is Vince McMahon. Another former NXT champ who has shown glimpses of greatness on WWE's main roster is Andrade, who may not have a firm grasp on the English language but has enough natural charisma and athletic ability to make up for it. The same could be said for Andrade's stablemate, Garza, who also earned a high percentage of votes. Poll respondents found a considerable upside in Ford, who has showcased true star power as one-half of the Raw tag team champions, The Street Profits. And, since parting with The Riott Squad and being repackaged late last year, Morgan has impressed fans with her confidence and wrestling ability.

ANDRADE	22%	MONTEZ FORD	8%
MURPHY	18%	LIV MORGAN	5%
ANGEL GARZA	13%	OTHERS	9%

### 14. WHICH WRESTLER CURRENTLY WITH SMACKDOWN WILL BE THE NEXT TO BECOME A MAJOR STAR?

Our panel found much more of an upside among Smackdown's roster of untapped female stars than its male ones. Chief among them was Lacey Evans, who was pushed into a title feud with WWE's hottest star, Becky Lynch, upon her main roster debut a year ago, but tumbled a few rungs on WWE's ladder in the months that followed. Still, voters remain confident that Evans' aggressiveness, looks, and inspirational background as a mother and military veteran is a recipe for stardom. Deville has shown considerable growth in the ring and behind the microphone in recent months, including in her high-profile WrestleMania storyline involving Rose, Otis, and Dolph Ziggler. Deville's fellow *Tough Enough* alumnus, Rose, has also looked right at home under the *Smackdown* spotlight. And her on-screen beau, Otis, has won over fans with his unconventional charisma. Voters still have high hopes for Shorty G, but it will take more than that to get him back on track.

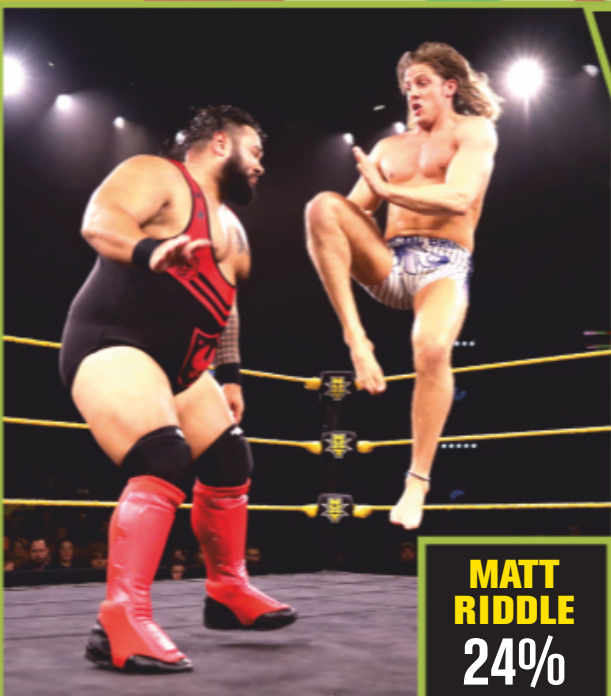


PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

**LACEY  
EVANS**  
**18%**

SONYA DEVILLE	17%	SHORTY G	15%	ELIAS	11%	OTHERS	8%
OTIS	15%	BIG E	13%	MANDY ROSE	3%		

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**MATT  
RIDDLE**  
**24%**

### 15. WHICH WRESTLER CURRENTLY WITH NXT WILL BE THE NEXT TO BECOME A MAJOR STAR?

Two of NXT's brightest stars dominated the voting in this category and ended up in a statistical tie. Riddle and Lee—long revered as the future of wrestling—accounted for nearly half the votes cast by our panel. Poll respondents were confident both men would be in the NXT heavyweight title mix by the end of the year—potentially in matches against each other. Grimes was regarded as one of the most well-rounded young wrestlers in the sport even during his days as CWF Mid-Atlantic standout Trevor Lee. He's solidified that reputation since joining NXT last year. Standing at 6'5", Priest has the size that many other wrestling prospects envy, but, at 38 years old, he has no time to waste.

KEITH LEE	24%	ISAIAH SCOTT	9%	DAKOTA KAI	3%
CAMERON GRIMES	11%	CANDICE LERAE	7%	OTHERS	6%
DAMIAN PRIEST	10%	BRONSON REED	6%		



16. WHO IS THE MOST UNDERRATED MALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?

After his years as an international sensation, it's been tough for a lot of fans to stomach the sight of Ricochet being relegated to mid-card matches on B-shows. His 90-second loss to Brock Lesnar at February's Super ShowDown event was especially deflating. His recent pairing with Cedric Alexander (who also secured a fair number of votes) is better than nothing, but fans expect more out of the former NXT North American and IWGP junior heavyweight champ. More than a quarter of voters believed Chad Gable's Olympic-level talents were being wasted in the horrendous "Shorty G" character. Once considered a can't-miss future world champion, Cesaro has settled into a lower-card role in WWE, and many fans believe he deserves better. As two of the top stars in NWA and MLW, respectively, Aldis and Smith are surely valued by their employers, but many fans would like to see their talents displayed on a bigger stage, like WWE or AEW.

SHORTY G	26%	NICK ALDIS	11%	SHELTON BENJAMIN	6%
CESARO	14%	HARRY SMITH	8%	OTHERS	4%



PHOTO BY STU SAKS

RICOCHET  
31%

17. WHO IS THE MOST UNDERRATED FEMALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?



TONI  
STORM  
20%

Leading up to her victory in the 2018 Mae Young Classic tournament, Storm was exhibiting all the hallmarks of a big-time star. But, since then, she has largely been hidden from view of most WWE fans as a member of the NXT U.K. roster. Natalya has long been regarded as one of the very best wrestlers in WWE, regardless of gender. But she's spent much of her career helping establish other top female stars, like Becky Lynch and Ronda Rousey, rather than being positioned as one herself. Twenty years after making her pro debut, Martinez finally signed a WWE contract at the age of 39. With any luck, she'll disappear from this list next year. Naomi, Riott, and LeRae round out the WWE-contracted female talents our panelists believe have yet to realize their potential within the company. Months after winning ROH's Women of Honor championship at Madison Square Garden, Klein found herself out of work after speaking out against the treatment she claims to have received after suffering injuries on the job. Some voters clearly believed she deserved better.

NATALYA	17%	NAOMI	15%	CANDICE LERAE	9%	BIG SWOLE	3%
MERCEDES MARTINEZ	16%	RUBY RIOTT	12%	KELLY KLEIN	5%	OTHERS	3%

18. WHO IS THE MOST OVERRATED MALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?

With his size, look, and pro-sports pedigree, it's understandable that Corbin would get multiple opportunities to prove his worth in WWE. And while he has considerably upped his game over the past year, several fans still believe his push, which included a King of the Ring tournament victory, is out of proportion with his ability. Just a couple of years ago, fans were clamoring for Rollins to return to the world title picture. But when he finally got there last year, some fans quickly tired of Rollins, who did himself no favors with several oblivious remarks in interviews and on social media. You'd have to be blind not to see what Lesnar brings to the table, but the fact that a part-timer who worked just eight matches in all of 2019 gets so much attention sat wrong with many poll respondents. Reigns, who was once synonymous among most WWE fans with the term "overrated," has clearly bought himself some good will over the past year.

SETH ROLLINS	20%	BROCK LESNAR	15%	KENNY OMEGA	7%	OTHERS	2%
BRAY WYATT	18%	ROMAN REIGNS	10%	THE YOUNG BUCKS	6%		



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

KING  
CORBIN  
22%



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

## 19. WHO IS THE MOST OVERRATED FEMALE WRESTLER IN THE WORLD?



**CHARLOTTE FLAIR**  
**33%**

Of the third of poll respondents who picked Charlotte for this unflattering distinction, most probably wouldn't question the tremendous talent possessed by the "Queen." But many feel the 12-time titleholder has been pushed down their throats for too long. And while her recent move back to NXT may open up some lanes for the main roster women to excel, it's also raising concerns over whether she'll suck up the oxygen in WWE's third brand. After pushing hard for her to make it to the top, some fans believe Lynch has overstayed her welcome in that spot. Rounding out WWE's female champions

is Bayley, who has shown some growing pains in the role of a villain. Over at AEW, some voters questioned whether Rose had sufficient seasoning to warrant her being slotted above more experienced competitors. Similarly, some thought Statlander might have been pushed to title contention too soon upon her arrival in AEW.

BECKY LYNCH  
BAYLEY

21%  
15%

NYLA ROSE  
KRIS STATLANDER

14%  
7%

SHAYNA BASZLER  
OTHER

4%  
6%

## 20. WHO IS WRESTLING'S SEXIEST WOMAN?

With looks and brains that are both equally disarming, AEW's chief branding officer, Brandi Rhodes, edged out the other women in this category. Our panelists also swooned over Mandy Rose nearly as much as Otis has. Although she's more than proven she belongs in WWE on merit alone, Rose also would have fit in just fine in the era of Divas swimsuit photo shoots. Though far rougher around the edges than the other women on this list, "The Man" is still quite the woman, according to 17 percent of the voters. Other poll respondents were more envious of Rusev or Bobby Lashley ... or whomever Lana is attached to these days. Others prefer to hop beside AEW's bodacious "Bunny," Allie.

MANDY ROSE  
BECKY LYNCH  
LANA  
ALLIE

19%  
17%  
15%  
10%

ALEXA BLISS  
BIANCA BELAIR  
KAIRI SANE  
OTHERS

6%  
5%  
4%  
3%

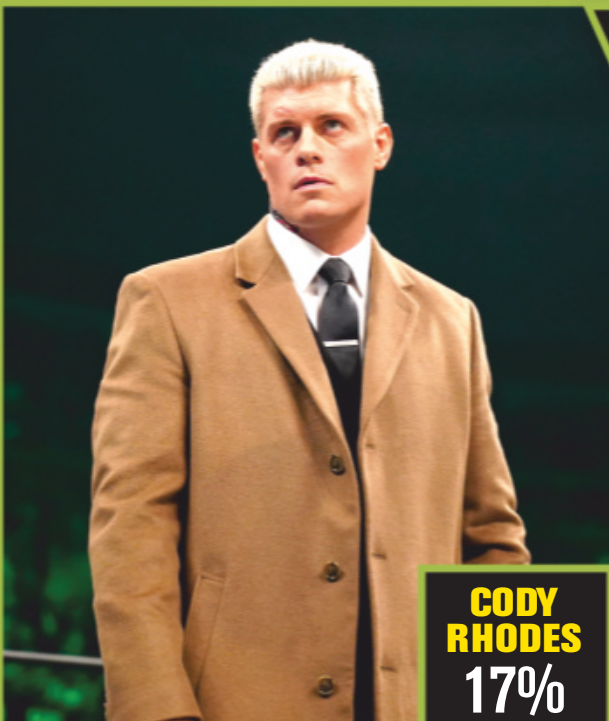


**BRANDI RHODES**  
**21%**

PHOTO BY SADIEL "SPEEDY" RUIZ/AEW

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

## 21. WHO IS WRESTLING'S SEXIEST MAN?



**CODY RHODES**  
**17%**

This much is for certain: If Cody and Brandi Rhodes ever decided to procreate, that would be one good-looking kid. Whether it's his piercing blue eyes, how he fills out an expensive suit, or the passion he displays every time he steps inside a ring or in front of a microphone—it certainly wouldn't be that new neck tattoo—the "American Nightmare" sure is dreamy, according to our panelists. Tying with Cody is Ricochet, who may not be getting much love from WWE shot-callers these days, but sure got plenty from our voters. Although they may not have approved of Balor's recent tactics, admirers continue to approve of his looks. Thirty years after his father, Luke Perry, became a heartthrob as Dylan McKay on *Beverly Hills, 90210*, Jungle Boy is doing much the same on AEW. And, in case the whole WWE World champion thing doesn't work out, McIntyre can take some solace in knowing he might have a future in modeling.

RICOCHET  
FINN BALOR  
ROMAN REIGNS

17%  
16%  
11%

JUNGLE BOY  
DREW MCINTYRE  
ADAM COLE

11%  
10%  
9%

OTHERS

9%



22. WHO DOES THE BEST PROMOS?

After years of suffering through WWE’s tightly scripted monologues, fans have been clamoring for some authenticity in their wrestling promos. AEW has provided the antidote to that approach, and our panelists were eager to voice their approval. There’s no need to force yourself to suspend disbelief when watching Rhodes speak. Few others can convey real, raw emotion like the “American Nightmare,” whose passion and believability when cutting a promo have elevated the stakes of many a rivalry. Two of those feuds were against opponents with their own gifts of gab. Jericho has combined obnoxiousness, vulgarity, and comedy into an entertaining package. And, for someone so young, MJF shows the comfort and confidence behind the mic of someone twice his age. Moxley had a lot to get off his chest after leaving WWE last year and has parlayed his angst into promo gold. And, over at NWA, “The National Treasure” Nick Aldis’ speaking skills have been nothing short of a revelation for fans.

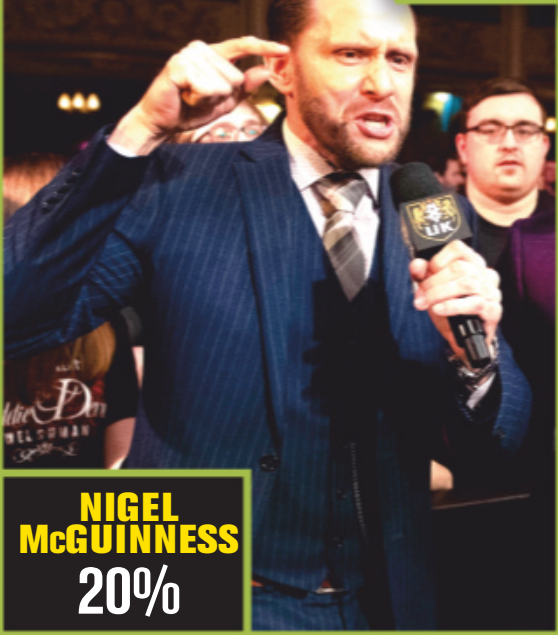


PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

CODY RHODES  
24%

CHRIS JERICO	20%	JON MOXLEY	14%	DANIEL BRYAN	5%	OTHERS	7%
MJF	17%	NICK ALDIS	9%	JUICE ROBINSON	4%		

23. WHO IS WRESTLING’S BEST TV ANNOUNCER?



NIGEL MCGUINNESS  
20%

Here’s another category where WWE, despite being the industry leader, has fallen way behind. The announce teams of WWE’s two top television shows, *Raw* and *Smackdown*, garnered only a few scant votes among our panelists. While McGuinness and Ranallo may have their paychecks signed by Vince McMahon, their announcing style on *NXT* is the antithesis of the over-produced shilling that’s typical of WWE’s flagship shows. More than 30 years after first working together, Schiavone and Ross have been reunited under the Turner banner. They have proven they still rank among the best in the sport when it comes to conveying drama from behind an announce table. Their broadcast partner, the masked Excalibur, is not far behind. And NJPW play-by-play man Kevin Kelly, who cut his teeth as a third-string announcer in WWE in the 1990s, has developed into one of the most passionate, authoritative, and respected voices in the sport.

MAURO RANALLO	19%	JIM ROSS	14%	EXCALIBUR	13%
TONY SCHIAVONE	18%	KEVIN KELLY	14%	OTHERS	2%

24. WHO WAS WRESTLING’S MVP OF 2019?

In getting AEW off the ground last year, it was critical that the upstart company’s inaugural heavyweight champion be a credible one. Jericho delivered the goods both in the ring and behind the microphone and went above and beyond the call of duty to help establish AEW as a major player. WWE strapped the proverbial rocket to the back of Lynch last year—even having her come out victorious in the first-ever women’s main event match at *WrestleMania*. “The Man” conducted herself with confidence and grace in the high-profile role. Cole anchored *NXT* as its champion for most of the year and represented the brand with distinction leading up to, and at, *Survivor Series*. As sparse as they were, Lesnar made all of his TV appearances feel special, and his matches were major attractions. Rhodes played a critical role in AEW’s freshman year, both on-screen, as one of the company’s most popular wrestlers, and behind the scenes as a co-founder and executive vice president.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

CHRIS JERICO  
18%

BECKY LYNCH	17%	BROCK LESNAR	14%	KAZUCHIKA OKADA	11%
ADAM COLE	16%	CODY RHODES	12%	OTHERS	12%



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PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



**JON MOXLEY**  
25%

## 25. WHO DO YOU THINK WILL BE NUMBER ONE IN THE 2020 "PWI 500"?

AEW World titleholder Moxley is yet to be defeated since joining the company more than a year ago. Mox has scored victories over top-tier challengers, including Kenny Omega, Chris Jericho, and Jake Hager. But it remains to be seen whether he can keep his momentum through the end of the evaluation period. Thanks to his epic, ongoing reign as NXT champ, Cole was another popular pick in this category. But to achieve the number-one ranking, Cole will have to overcome the stigma of working on WWE's least established brand—something no other NXT champion has ever been able to do. Having won the Royal Rumble and defeated Brock Lesnar for the Universal championship at WrestleMania, McIntyre probably has the strongest resume of any member of the Raw or Smackdown rosters. Naito won both the IWGP Intercontinental and heavyweight titles over Wrestle Kingdom weekend and has held both ever since. That puts him on strong footing, according to our panelists.

ADAM COLE	23%	TETSUYA NAITO	13%	OTHERS	11%
DREW MCINTYRE	18%	CHRIS JERICHO	10%		

## 26. WHO DO YOU THINK WILL BE NUMBER ONE IN THE PWI "WOMEN'S 100" IN 2020?

Our panelists felt strongly that it's a two-horse race for the top spot in this year's "Women's 100." After holding the Raw Women's championship for more than a year, Lynch garnered more than a third of all the votes in this category, making her a strong favorite to become the first wrestler to rank number one in consecutive years. But Blanchard is not far behind. Considering her reign as Impact heavyweight champion, along with her victories over a multitude of top male contenders, Blanchard has had a truly historic year. From there, it's a big drop-off to the next highest vote-getter, Charlotte, who added another trophy to her mantle with her NXT championship victory at WrestleMania. Nobody else achieved even a double-digit percentage in the voting.

TESSA BLANCHARD	33%	RHEA RIPLEY	6%
CHARLOTTE FLAIR	11%	OTHERS	7%
RIHO	8%		



**BECKY LYNCH**  
35%

PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO



**OWEN HART**  
35%

## 27. LIST IN ORDER YOUR PREFERENCES FOR THE NEXT FIVE SELECTIONS TO THE WWE HALL OF FAME.

It's been more than two decades since Owen Hart tragically fell to his death, and several fans think the time is right for "The Rocket" to take his rightful place in the WWE Hall of Fame. But some obstacles remain in the way of this becoming a reality, including some very hard feelings against WWE on the part of Hart's widow, Martha. WWE officials would surely love nothing more than to have Hollywood's biggest box-office attraction, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, headline its annual Hall of Fame induction ceremony. But, as with all of Johnson's WWE appearances, the challenge may be fitting it into his busy schedule. It doesn't sit well with many fans that all-time great wrestling villain, Ivan Koloff, who ended Bruno Sammartino's 7½-year world title reign, continues to be snubbed.

(Note: Results reflect the percentage of times each individual was named among a panelist's top five choices. Percentage totals in this category do not equal 100.)

THE ROCK	28%	MISS ELIZABETH	13%
IVAN KOLOFF	18%	DEMOLITION	9%



28. AT PRESS TIME, RAW WAS AVERAGING 1.82 MILLION WEEKLY VIEWERS. WHERE DO YOU SEE THAT AUDIENCE A YEAR FROM NOW?

WWE’s flagship show has fallen to some of its lowest ratings in history, and more than three-quarters of our panelists believe the situation is going to get worse over the next 12 months. Part of that pessimism may have to do with the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in WWE taping its television shows without live audiences. The eerie, antiseptic atmosphere has not made for exciting television most weeks. But the declining trend in *Raw*’s ratings began well before the coronavirus outbreak and may have more to do with WWE’s inability to create stars and showcase them in compelling storylines. The jury is still out as to whether the brand’s new champion, Drew McIntyre, can be a difference-maker. Also hampering *Raw* is its tedious three-hour format, which can test the endurance of even the most loyal WWE fan.

SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER	22%	SLIGHTLY HIGHER	8%
ABOUT THE SAME	12%	SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER	2%



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29. AT PRESS TIME, SMACKDOWN WAS AVERAGING 2.4 MILLION WEEKLY VIEWERS. WHERE DO YOU SEE THAT AUDIENCE A YEAR FROM NOW?



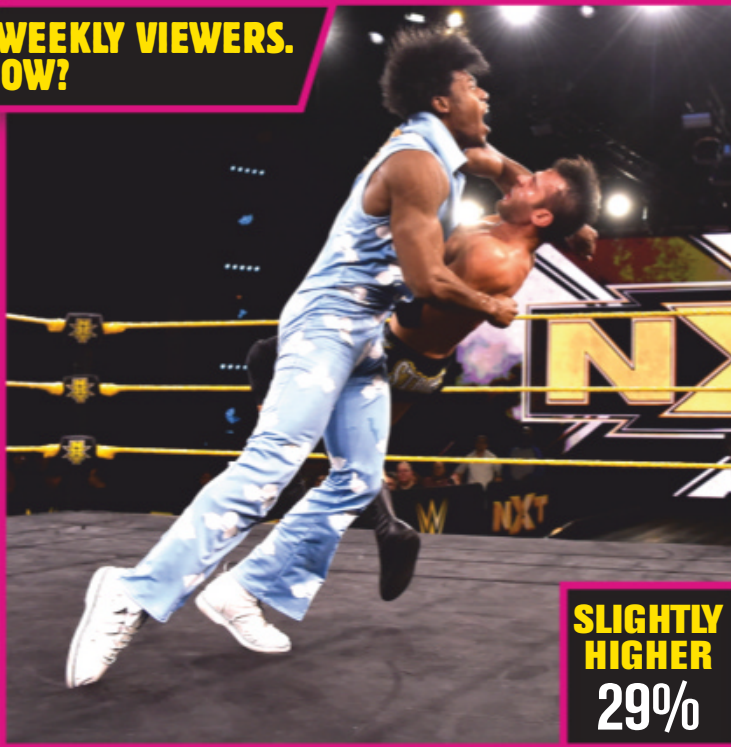
There was a little more optimism among voters about *Smackdown*’s ability to increase its audience, or at least tread water, for the next year. In last year’s poll, respondents had high hopes that the blue brand’s move to Fox would result in sizable audience gains. But, by April, the show’s ratings had fallen below its average in 2019. Although the most recent numbers were undoubtedly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Fox brass can’t be thrilled with the return they’ve gotten so far on their sizable investment. Eric Bischoff, who was hired to lead *Smackdown* in its new network television home, was axed just days after the show’s debut on Fox and replaced with Bruce Prichard. But the numbers have only gotten worse since then. Could more heads roll in the coming months? Rather than look to assign blame for the disappointing numbers, some panelists suggested that WWE should focus on creating the kind of stars that will make *Smackdown* must-see TV.

SLIGHTLY HIGHER	24%	SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER	15%
ABOUT THE SAME	22%	SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER	13%

30. AT PRESS TIME, NXT WAS AVERAGING 1.82 MILLION WEEKLY VIEWERS. WHERE DO YOU SEE THAT AUDIENCE A YEAR FROM NOW?

Although it has the smallest audience of WWE’s three televised wrestling shows, *NXT* is also the most critically acclaimed. And nearly half of our panelists are counting on more and more wrestling fans discovering the black-and-gold brand over the next year. Seemingly standing in the way of *NXT* growing its audience is that other show airing on Wednesday nights—AEW *Dynamite*. Although the upstart wrestling company has drawn more viewers on TNT than *NXT* has on USA—most weeks, anyway—the competition could ultimately help *NXT* if the rising tide of the “Wednesday Night War” lifts all boats. A quality wrestling show on another channel could also push *NXT* wrestlers, and its brain trust, to put on the best product possible.

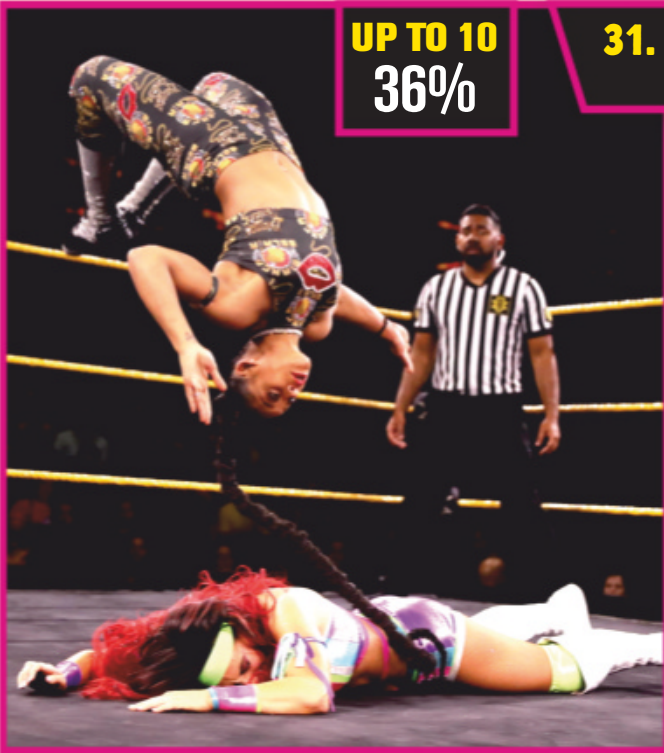
ABOUT THE SAME	27%	SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER	13%
SLIGHTLY LOWER	21%	SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER	10%



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UP TO 10  
36%

### 31. HOW MANY HOURS OF WRESTLING DO YOU WATCH ON A WEEKLY BASIS?

With pro wrestling taking up more hours of television programming than at any time in recent history, even someone who describes himself as a “casual” fan might consume 10 hours of wrestling over a seven-day period. And that’s if there’s no pay-per-view event that weekend. The addition of AEW and NXT on prime time cable TV has added considerably to the watch lists of fans. But most aren’t complaining, considering the high quality of both. Throw in a few hours of WWE Network programming, like *NXT U.K.*, and other televised promotions, like ROH, Impact, and MLW, and a fan could easily take in 15 hours of wrestling a week—as nearly a third of respondents said they do. Still, a sizable chunk of our panel tunes in only to wrestling’s two most established shows, *Raw* and *Smackdown*. And a few struggle to make it past the 60-minute mark. We’ve all been there.

15 OR MORE 29% 2 TO 5 HOURS 20% ONE OR LESS 15%

### 32. WHICH WRESTLING STREAMING SERVICES DO YOU SUBSCRIBE TO?

When the WWE Network was launched in 2014, company executives predicted that the streaming service could eventually grow to as many as 4-million subscribers. But the network’s subscriber count has remained flat for years, hovering at around 1.5 million. That’s a respectable number, but well under WWE’s expectations. That’s why Vince McMahon has said the company is considering moving at least some of its biggest shows, like *WrestleMania*, to other streaming platforms. If that’s the case, WWE’s Network’s subscriber count could drop considerably by next year’s poll. New Japan World remains an important resource for Americans wanting to check out NJPW action, especially since the company lost its U.S. cable television partner in AXS TV. And even though Impact now airs on AXS, loads of fans still subscribe to Impact Plus to watch the archived matches from the glory years of TNA. Finally, smaller, independent streamers have also continued to provide a valuable service, especially as most Americans were forced to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(Note: As panelists could subscribe to multiple streaming services, percentage totals do not equal 100.)

NEW JAPAN WORLD	18%	FITE+	7%	INDEPENDENT WRESTLING TV	2%
IMPACT PLUS	14%	HIGHSPOTS WRESTLING NETWORK	3%	OTHERS	5%
HONOR CLUB	12%	WORLD WRESTLING NETWORK	2%	NONE	37%

WWE NETWORK  
35%



LIVE  
WRESTLING  
EVENTS  
30%

### 33. WHEN DECIDING WHETHER TO SUBSCRIBE TO A STREAMING SERVICE, WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?



With traditional pay-per-view becoming more obsolete by the day, fans are increasingly turning to streaming services to catch live major wrestling events. That includes WWE’s usual slate of monthly supershows, as well as network specials, like the *Super ShowDown* international event and the occasional televised house show, like *Starrcade*. Live shows are also a major selling point for

services like New Japan World, which hosts such major events as *Wrestle Kingdom*, and for Ring of Honor’s *Honor Club*, which airs every big ROH show live. Known to be a nostalgic bunch, wrestling fans also love to dig into streaming services’ archives. A few panelists mentioned their displeasure with the WWE Network no longer updating its “Hidden Gems” section. Not surprisingly, price remains a major sticking point for some fans, especially as many of them subscribe to more than one service at a time. With most services ranging in cost from about \$8 to \$10 a month, that can quickly add up.

ARCHIVE	24%	AVAILABILITY ACROSS PLATFORMS	12%	OTHER	7%
PRICE	18%	ORIGINAL PROGRAMMING	9%		



34. IF WWE WERE TO MOVE ALL OR SOME OF ITS PREMIER EVENTS TO A THIRD-PARTY STREAMING SERVICE, WOULD YOU STILL SUBSCRIBE TO THE NETWORK?

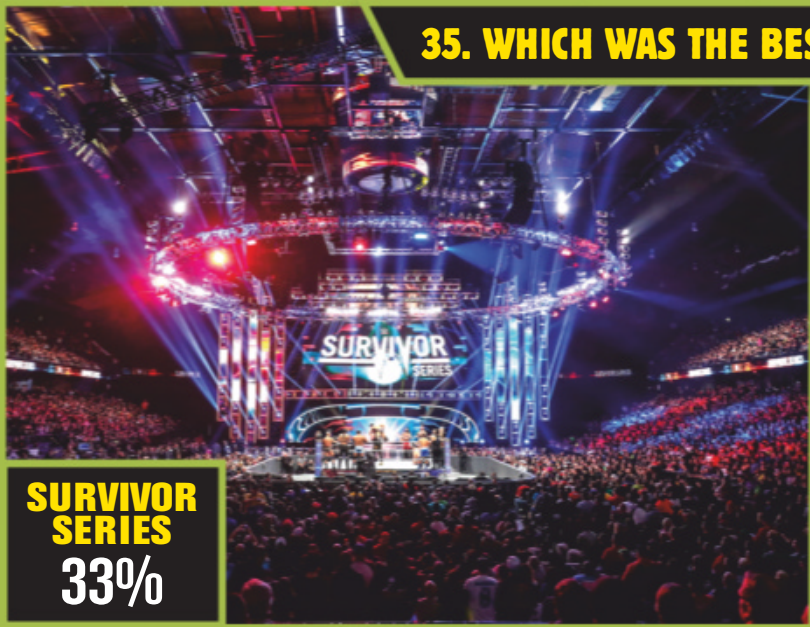
YES  
56%

After six years of having every pay-per-view included in their Network subscription, many fans might feel perturbed needing to go to an additional service (like Amazon Prime) to keep up with WWE’s biggest events. Still, more than half of our panel thinks the WWE Network offers enough bang for the buck, even without the big pay-per-views, to make it worthwhile. Weekly wrestling shows, like *205 Live* and *NXT U.K.*, deliver some of the highest-octane action of any WWE programming. And many network specials, like the recent *Undertaker: The Last Ride* documentary, are worth \$10 all on their own. However, the WWE Network lost one of its biggest selling points when the weekly *NXT* program moved to the USA Network.



YES 56% NO 44%

35. WHICH WAS THE BEST WWE PPV OF 2019?



WWE’s second-oldest annual pay-per-view event came through in a big way in 2019. Fans were genuinely invested in the annual battle for brand supremacy, especially with the inclusion of *NXT*, which fared surprisingly well against *Raw* and *Smackdown*. Brock Lesnar’s WWE title defense against Rey Mysterio and the first-ever *NXT* title defense on a major WWE PPV delivered additional intrigue. Fans were also into the action on display at WWE’s “biggest party of the summer.” That show included a thrilling main event involving Seth Rollins and Brock Lesnar and a good, old-fashioned Goldberg squash match. Notably, the top-two vote-getters in this category were also among the shortest of WWE’s major pay-per-view events. Both main cards clocked in at around three hours—a fraction of the length of *WrestleMania* and the *Royal Rumble*, which ranked lower among our panelists.

SUMMERSLAM 24% ROYAL RUMBLE 15%  
WRESTLEMANIA 19% OTHERS 9%

36. ASSUMING VINCE McMAHON, STEPHANIE McMAHON, AND TRIPLE H ARE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE IN WRESTLING, WHO ARE THE NEXT FIVE?

TONY  
KHAN  
100%

There’s a new billionaire wrestling promoter in town. The Khan family’s success in getting All Elite Wrestling off the ground and quickly establishing it as a major force—both in the pro wrestling and cable television industries—solidified Khan, AEW’s president and chief executive officer, as a legit player. AEW co-founder Rhodes also ranked high, as panelists saw him as the public face of the company, as well as one of its most beloved stars. Meanwhile, longtime WWE executive producer Dunn continues to get credit as the brains behind WWE’s TV presentation. Dunn’s vision was stretched to new lengths when he was tasked with putting on a televised wrestling product without any fans in attendance. In addition to being a powerhouse in the ring, Lesnar remains a major power broker in WWE, as evidenced by his ability to remain at the top of the cards and earn top dollar, despite making only sporadic appearances. NJPW booker Gedo’s creative mastery recently earned him a place in the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame.

(Note: Results reflect the percentage of times each individual was named among a panelist’s top five choices. Percentage totals do not equal 100.)

CODY RHODES 70% BROCK LESNAR 40%  
KEVIN DUNN 65% GEDO 25%



PHOTO BY STU SAKS



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**NJPW**  
**100%**

### 37. ASSUMING WWE REMAINS THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PROMOTION, RANK THE NEXT FIVE.

New Japan has long been revered in its homeland, but only in recent years has it truly broken through among mainstream American wrestling fans. Even we at *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* have finally come around to recognizing the IWGP heavyweight championship as a world title. NJPW's proven track record of excellence was enough to edge out AEW, which still had not celebrated the first anniversary of its inaugural show when this poll was taken. Still, the majority of respondents were sold on the Khan family's promotion being a major player in the international wrestling landscape. Ring of Honor unquestionably took a few steps backward in the second half of last year—in part because both AEW and NXT co-opted the athletic wrestling style that was long its calling card. But, if only by default, many fans still see ROH as among the top five wrestling companies on the planet. Although its footprint is a fraction of the size of what it was a decade ago, the Impact name still carries some weight. The venerable NWA has experienced a resurgence under the ownership of Billy Corgan.

AEW	98%	IMPACT	40%
ROH	80%	NWA	18%

(Note: Results reflect the percentage of times each promotion was named among a panelist's top five choices. Percentage totals in this category do not equal 100.)

### 38. AT PRESS TIME, DYNAMITE WAS AVERAGING 826,000 WEEKLY VIEWERS. WHERE DO YOU SEE THAT AUDIENCE A YEAR FROM NOW?

Our panel was pretty bullish on the prospects of *Dynamite* continuing to grow its audience, with more than half of respondents predicting viewership would increase over the next 12 months. AEW's cable home, TNT, also likes the upstart wrestling company's chances. Just three months after *Dynamite* premiered on the network, the Warner Media-owned TV outlet extended its contract through 2023. Unfortunately, the show's viewership has sagged considerably since then. Part of that fall coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it challenging for AEW to put on its best presentation. AEW also has to deal with direct competition on Wednesday nights from NXT, which is steering away many viewers to its product. Whatever the reason, more than a quarter of respondents predicted *Dynamite*'s audience will only continue to shrink over the next year.



**SLIGHTLY HIGHER**  
**34%**

SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER	21%	SLIGHTLY LOWER	16%
ABOUT THE SAME	18%	SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER	11%

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW



**DARBY ALLIN**  
**20%**

### 39. WHICH WRESTLER CURRENTLY ON THE AEW ROSTER WILL BE THE NEXT TO BECOME A MAJOR STAR?

Whether it's the face paint, the skateboard, the entrance videos, or the daredevil wrestling style, this much is for certain: Darby Allin is just cool. And fully one-fifth of our panel sees him as having the biggest upside of any AEW star. Cassidy is another wholly original up-and-comer who, even from behind his Ray-Ban sunglasses, has managed to connect with fans like few others in recent years. Baker's evil dentist routine has been a big hit, and it has helped her stand out in AEW's women's division. At 43 years of age and with two decades of experience in the ring, Archer hardly qualifies as a young lion in the sport. But it's only now that his potential is finally being maximized. And both Jungle Boy and Guevara have shown an outsized, natural charisma that more than makes up for their modest dimensions.

ORANGE CASSIDY	19%	LANCE ARCHER	13%	SAMMY GUEVARA	8%
BRITT BAKER	16%	JUNGLE BOY	11%	OTHERS	13%



40. WHICH WEEKLY TV PROGRAM DO YOU FEEL HAS THE BEST IN-RING PRODUCT?

By the slimmest of margins, our panelists gave the edge to AEW when it came to bell-to-bell content. With internationally seasoned stars like Kenny Omega and The Young Bucks carrying the action in the ring—and calling the shots behind the scenes—the actual wrestling is the highest of priorities in AEW. The action is typically just as good over on NXT, but for the occasional WWE developmental signee who is wet behind the ears. This much is for certain: It’s especially good to be a wrestling fan on Wednesday nights. ROH still commands plenty of respect among fans for pioneering the wrestling style that AEW and NXT have brought to new audiences. And, although barely a blip on the radar of WWE’s menu of weekly programming, *205 Live* is still destination viewing for fans of wrestling artistry.

NXT	25%	205 LIVE	10%	MLW FUSION	7%
RING OF HONOR WRESTLING	19%	IMPACT WRESTLING	8%	OTHERS	5%



AEW  
DYNAMITE  
26%

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

41. WHICH WEEKLY TV PROGRAM DO YOU FEEL IS THE MOST ENTERTAINING OVERALL?



AEW  
DYNAMITE  
28%

SMACKDOWN	21%	NWA POWERRR	7%
RAW	19%	OTHERS	11%
NXT	14%		

Although the in-ring action may be its calling card, AEW has also brought the “sports entertainment” quotient most weeks since *Dynamite* debuted in October. From Chris Jericho’s “Bubbly Bunch” skits, to Cody’s compelling promos, to jaw-dropping surprises like the debut of Matt Hardy, *Dynamite* provides as many thrills in between matches as its does during them. With a fresh coat of paint over on Fox, and with fun segments like the “Firefly Fun House” and the Otis-Mandy Rose-Dolph Ziggler love triangle, *Smackdown*’s 120 minutes is usually top-notch. That can’t always be said for *Raw*, which can be a real slog at three hours. As great as the in-ring action typically is on *NXT*, the small crowds, dim lighting, and general lack of color can make it feel pretty joyless some weeks. Billy Corgan’s rebooted NWA received a surprising number of votes from panelists, who appreciated the show’s promo-heavy format and throwback studio setting.

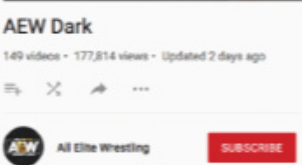
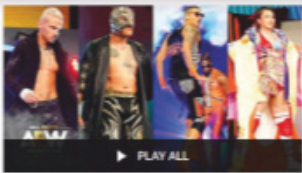
PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

42. WHICH WEEKLY WRESTLING SHOWS, IF ANY, DO YOU WATCH ON YOUTUBE?

AEW fans clamoring for more content than they get on Wednesday nights have flocked to *Dark*, which has featured top talent in marquee matches. How refreshingly retro is the National Wrestling Alliance’s weekly *Powerrr* series? It airs at 6:05 p.m.—the distinctive time slot of the NWA on the TBS Superstation throughout the 1980s and 1990s. But it’s more than just nostalgia that has made *Powerrr* such a hit on

YouTube—averaging more than 200,000 viewers per episode since it debuted in October. In addition to showcasing established acts like The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express and Ken Anderson, *Powerrr* has spotlighted newer talents, including Thunder Rosa and Ricky Starks. The web show that helped give birth to AEW, *Being The Elite*, is still going strong after recently celebrating its 200th episode. The show features some of the best comedy ever attempted in wrestling, but has also added dimension to Cody Rhodes, The Young Bucks, and the rest of the Elite squad. Finally, readers who don’t get the beIN Sports network on their cable system regularly check out MLW’s *Fusion* series on YouTube.

NWA POWERRR	21%	MLW FUSION	10%	NONE	20%
BEING THE ELITE	19%	OTHERS	7%		



- 1 AEW DARK EPISODE 34 | 05/19/20  
All Elite Wrestling - Premieres 5/19/20, 7:00 PM
- 2 FENIX VS ALAN ANGELS | AEW DARK - 3/12/20  
All Elite Wrestling
- 3 PRIVATE PARTY VS LEE JOHNSON & MUSA | AEW DARK - 3/12/20  
All Elite Wrestling
- 4 #10 vs JON CRUZ | AEW DARK - 3/12/20  
All Elite Wrestling
- 5 KRIS STATLANDER VS DANI JORDYN | AEW DARK - 3/12/20  
All Elite Wrestling

AEW DARK  
23%



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#### 43. NOW THAT IT'S NO LONGER AIRING ON AXS, WILL NEW JAPAN FIND A NEW AMERICAN TV DEAL WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR?

**NO**  
**63%**

AXS' cancellation on NJPW's weekly show couldn't have come at a worse time for Japan's premier wrestling promotion. The company was finally making inroads in the U.S., having helped sell out Madison Square Garden months earlier, and AXS was investing resources into making the weekly show as current as possible. But the writing was on the wall when Anthem Sports—owner of Impact Wrestling—purchased AXS in September. The Canadian company quickly moved Impact onto a primetime spot on AXS and removed all other wrestling properties from the schedule.

All these months later, most of our panelists believed if another cable network was interested in carrying NJPW, it would have happened by now. But others reasoned AEW *Dynamite*'s strong numbers on TNT could help make the case for the potential success of a non-WWE TV wrestling show.

NO

63%

YES

37%

#### 44. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF WWE'S DECISION TO CONTINUE WITH WRESTLEMANIA IN AN EMPTY ARENA?

Mirroring the national debate over the proper response to the COVID-19 pandemic, our panelists were closely split over whether WWE made the right call by holding its biggest show of the year in front of no fans at the tiny WWE Performance Center. By a small margin, they supported the company's decision, believing that enough precautions were taken to protect the health of WWE employees, while also considering the importance of providing much-needed entertainment to fans watching at home. But nearly as many poll respondents were appalled by the decision, especially given how much was still unknown about the pandemic in early-April. Those fans believed WWE would have been wise to put off the show until a later date. Still, with the realization looming that restrictions on large gatherings could last into 2021, waiting to hold WrestleMania 36 in front of a packed stadium may have meant never getting to it at all.


**STRONGLY APPROVED**  
**33%**
**STRONGLY DISAPPROVED**  
**SOMEWHAT APPROVED**
**28%**  
**21%**

SOMEWHAT DISAPPROVED

18%

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#### 45. SHOULD STATES HAVE CONSIDERED PRO WRESTLING AMONG THE "ESSENTIAL" BUSINESSES ALLOWED TO CONTINUE OPERATING THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?


**NO**  
**20%**

Even fans who were happy to have first-run episodes of *Raw*, *Smackdown*, and *Dynamite* had a hard time buying that pro wrestling promotions should get the same leeway given to healthcare providers and grocery stores during the COVID-19 shutdown. But, sure enough, that's what Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis decreed when "professional sports and media production with a national audience" did, indeed, provide an "essential service," and could continue to operate in the state, as long as shows were closed to the general public. The ruling allowed for WWE and AEW to continue taping their slate of programming, including *Raw*, *Smackdown*, *NXT*, and *Dynamite*, in the Sunshine State. A fair amount of panelists argued that, by giving TV viewers a reason to stay at home, wrestling companies were playing a vital role in protecting the health of the general public—if not, necessarily, the wrestlers actually performing on those shows.

NO

61%

YES

39%



46. ASSUMING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 SLOWS, WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO ATTEND A LIVE PRO WRESTLING EVENT IN THE NEXT SIX MONTHS??

YES  
72%

For tens of thousands of fans, the COVID-19 pandemic meant having to forgo watching wrestling live. That includes fans who had tickets to dozens of wrestling shows that were canceled, including WrestleMania. If our panel is any indication, those fans are anxious to return to live wrestling, even if it comes with some risk. But even if wrestling companies do return to shows with audiences in the near future, it's likely those shows will be different than what fans are used to. Promotions could include capacity limitations to allow fans to keep a safe social distance from one another, as well as facemask requirements. Many of our panelists indicated that they'd gladly accept the new protocols if it meant returning to ringside. However, for more than a quarter of respondents, no amount of mitigation is enough for them to take the chance of getting infected at a live wrestling show. They'll keep watching on TV until they're convinced it's truly safe to return.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

YES 72% NO 28%

47. WHICH MAJOR WRESTLING PROMOTION DO YOU FEEL HAD THE MOST APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO COVID-19?



AEW  
25%

NJPW	22%	IMPACT	9%
ROH	20%	MLW	7%
WWE	17%		

When considering which wrestling company did the best job of handling a situation that seemed unfathomable just months ago, a quarter of our panelists gave the nod to AEW. By testing talent, keeping announcers at a safe distance from each other, and putting some wrestlers in the stands to simulate an audience, the upstart wrestling company carefully balanced protecting its staff with providing a quality product for fans watching at home. Even those who wanted their televised wrestling applauded NJPW and ROH for putting the health of their employees first and shutting down altogether. Although there were far fewer cases in the entire country of Japan than in many U.S. states, NJPW President Harold Meij made it clear that events would not resume until he was convinced it was safe to do so—however long it took. Many fans who appreciated WWE's efforts to keep them entertained did not appreciate the company's decision to lay off dozens of wrestlers as a cost-cutting measure in the middle of the pandemic, especially considering WWE had just reported record annual earnings weeks earlier.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

48. WOULD YOU WATCH A WRESTLING SHOW COMPRISED ONLY OF PRE-TAPED CINEMATIC MATCHES (IN THE STYLE OF THE BONEYARD MATCH AND FIREFLY FUN HOUSE MATCH)?

WrestleMania's two most memorable bouts—the Boneyard Match between AJ Styles and the Undertaker, and the Firefly Fun House Match involving Bray Wyatt and John Cena—caused a lot of fans to reconsider how modern pro wrestling could be presented. Although those matches were the product of the unique circumstances of not being able to have a live audience, many fans liked what they saw ... and are up for seeing more of the same. That doesn't necessarily mean setting matches in such untraditional locations as a cemetery or the furthest reaches of "The Fiend's" dark mind. Johnny Gargano's clash with Tommaso Ciampa on the April 8 edition of *NXT* showed that some cinematic touches could be used to add drama to what is otherwise a traditional wrestling brawl. Still, more than a fifth of poll respondents indicated they had only so much tolerance for wrestling companies trying to imitate Hollywood studios. They'd prefer to hold on to whatever is left of pro wrestling presented as a sport.

YES 79% NO 21%



YES  
79%

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49. WHO DO YOU FEEL IS THE HOTTEST FREE AGENT ON THE INDEPENDENT WRESTLING CIRCUIT?

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KARL ANDERSON & LUKE GALLOWES  
23%

JEFF COBB	20%
KELLY KLEIN	12%
LIO RUSH	11%
DAVID STARR	5%
NICK GAGE	3%
OTHERS	26%

Several of the top vote-getters have already had successful runs in WWE, only to find themselves released as part of COVID-19 cost cuts. Among the biggest shockers on that list were Gallows and Anderson, who, as two-thirds of the OC faction, had just come off a very high-profile spot at WrestleMania as part of the Boneyard Match between AJ Styles and The Undertaker. Wrestling promoters will surely clamor to hire the “Good Brothers.” Although Cobb has made appearances on ROH and AEW in recent months, the feeling is that he would be welcome just about anywhere. Given his size, agility, and technical acumen, there’s no questioning the former NJPW NEVER Openweight champ is a hot commodity. Klein, the former ROH Women of Honor champ, would also be a solid pickup for any wrestling company looking to add depth to its women’s division. Starr and Gage—both standouts on the contemporary indie scene—were prominent on some of our panelists’ radar.

50. DO YOU FEEL THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF PRO WRESTLING IS BETTER OR WORSE THAN IT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO?

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BETTER  
57%

Several respondents noted that wrestling’s perception in the mainstream could be significantly better were it not for several major public relations missteps on the part of WWE in recent years, including its ongoing working relationship with the Saudi Arabian government

and its insistence on running shows throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. But even with those missteps, pro wrestling has made strides in gaining acceptance over the last five years. Much of that is due to WWE’s television deal with Fox, which gave it a primetime spot on network television. Traditional sports media has also come around to covering pro wrestling, including *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN. Wrestling stars with crossover cred, like John Cena and Ronda Rousey, have also helped make wrestling more palatable for the masses. And AEW has helped the industry quite a bit, both by putting forth a different presentation of pro wrestling and by lighting a fire under WWE.

BETTER 57% WORSE 43%

ILLUSTRATED PRESENTS...

THE PWI PODCAST

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Each week, Castle and Solomon interview top wrestling personalities or fellow *PWI* writers about the hottest topics in the sport.

Their guest list has included Shawn Michaels, Charlotte, Roman Reigns, and Cody Rhodes, as well as current and former *PWI* contributors Craig Peters, Harry Burkett, Mike Bessler, Louie D, Kevin McElvaney, Kris Zellner, and Stu Saks.

“The *PWI* Podcast” is available as a free subscription at the iTunes Store or streaming at [pwi-online.com](http://pwi-online.com)



*WILLIE MACK HASN'T HAD  
AN EASY LIFE, BUT HE'S  
STRONGER FOR HAVING  
LIVED IT. NOW HE'S EAGER  
TO WRITE HIS CHAPTER IN  
THE IMPACT WRESTLING  
HISTORY BOOK.*





# RISE OF THE MACK

FROM LIVING ON THE STREETS  
TO LIVING HIS DREAM

TEXT BY KEVIN MCELVANEY  
PHOTOS BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING

**L**ET IT NEVER be said that Willie Mack isn't willing to put it all on the line. He's weathered loss, heartbreak, and even homelessness, but he's never stopped chasing his boyhood dream of being a professional wrestler. A decade-and-a-half after he first started training, his persistence is paying off in a big way.

As a teenager, Mack was a huge fan of TNA/Impact's burgeoning X division. At age 33, he became its champion—defeating Ace Austin on Night One of Impact's two-part Rebellion event in April.

"It feels great," he said. "Knowing all the great guys that came out of the X division, like Samoa Joe and AJ Styles, and now I'm a part of that group."

Ever since debuting for the company in 2018, Mack has wowed Impact Wrestling fans with his unique mix of hard-hitting offense and aerial abilities. His skills are made all the more impressive when his size is taken into account; Mack stands 5'10" and weighs 280 pounds.

When asked how he stacks up against other big men who've worn the X division belt—such as Samoa Joe, Bobby Lashley, and Brian Cage—Mack is surprisingly modest. "I guess I could be somewhere in



Willie Mack has never been thrilled by the traditional heavyweight wrestling style. He'd much rather execute high-risk moves like this standing shooting star press [left] or his version of the Van Terminator [below].





the middle,” he said. “Because I’m not all the way there yet, but I’m getting there. Even though I’ve been in this business so long, there’s still stuff I can learn, and do, and improve on.”

The St. Louis-born, Los Angeles-raised talent is a lifelong wrestling fan who grew up admiring the technical prowess of Bret Hart, Dean Malenko, and Rey Mysterio. At age 14, Mack took a long bus ride to the City of Industry, where he was able to train alongside a class of grappling hopefuls. He knew right away this was what he wanted to do.

“I was like, ‘I’m going to wait until I graduate and get my diploma first, and I’ll see y’all again in four years,’” Mack recalls. “Sure enough, I graduated on a Wednesday in 2005. The next day, I went back to the training. Some of the same people were there, and they said, ‘Oh, you actually came back!’”

After training at the Alternative Wrestling Show facility, Mack made his in-ring debut for the California promotion. Within a few years, he was competing for Championship Wrestling from Hollywood and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla—picking up wins over Kevin Steen (Owens), Chris Hero, and other big names. Even in those salad days, Mack was already utilizing the flashy, high-impact style that’s set him apart in the X division.

“When you get into wrestling, they always want you to be, like, the big power dude and not be able to move around the ring,” he said. “Like, just be slow and work a heavyweight style. But I never liked it.”

This refusal to conform to expectations has served him well, even if his path to success has been long and rocky. Mack had a rough childhood, with his mother passing away when he was only 14. He spent his for-

mative years in the foster care system and was enrolled in special education classes. Even as he seemed poised for success as a wrestler, he hit another roadblock. In 2014, Mack signed a developmental deal with WWE, only to be released following his medical screening. The night after he got the news, he honored what was supposed to be his final independent appearance.

“I went out there and wrestled, and I was just going through the motions,” he said. “It was like I was there, but I wasn’t there at the same time. It was tough as hell. And I was like, ‘Man, I gotta quit.’”

In the wake of his WWE release, Mack found himself homeless and dejected. But, just as he was about to give up his dream, his luck turned around. He was offered a contract by Lucha Underground, where he wrestled as “The Mack” and became a Trios champion.

After Mack’s Lucha Underground contract expired, he likely could’ve wrestled just about anywhere. He chose to sign with Impact Wrestling, which he’d followed closely since the company’s early days of weekly pay-per-views.

“The reason I came to Impact was because the best wrestlers in the world are there,” Mack said. “You look at the roster, it’s stacked as hell. The X division’s got some of the greatest high-flyers, technical wrestlers ... whatever kind of thing you’re looking for in wrestling, the X division has it all.”

En route to the championship, Mack bested all the high-flyers and technicians in his way. In fact, as of press time, he hadn’t lost a televised singles match all year. Mack earned his title shot by winning an eight-man scramble on February 9 in Las Vegas, beginning

his rivalry with champion Ace Austin that peaked with his title win at Rebellion.

Now that he’s champion, Mack’s looking to mix it up with anyone on the roster who might want an opportunity, listing The Deaners, The Rascalz, and Rohit Raju as potential challengers. Another one of the division’s top performers is Mack’s close friend, Rich Swann, who first introduced him to Impact audiences as his tag partner at Bound for Glory 2018. What if Swann wants a title shot?

“That’s fine! I know it comes along with the territory because I’m a



Following an impressive, months-long winning streak, Mack defeated Ace Austin for the X division title—pinning him after connecting with his signature Six-Star Frog Splash.





Willie Mack celebrates his title win with tag partner Rich Swann. Mack says he'll defend the championship against "any and all comers" ... and that includes Swann.

champion now," Mack said. "When you're a regular dude, nobody really cares about wrestling you. But once you win the title, everybody is like, 'Oh, hell yeah, we're going after you.' We'll still be homies afterward, I'm pretty sure."

And Mack is hopeful that the two will remain allies, because he also has his sights set on the Impact tag team championship. "We were on a roll.

We were going straight through it, and he got injured," he said. "Now he's just rehabbing and feeling a little bit better. I've got to wait until he's 100 percent, and we're gonna go right back at them. Because that's what we came in here for. He brought me in, and I want him to be the one I win the tag title with."

With one title in his possession and his sights on another, the pressure is indeed on. When he needs to let loose, the X division champ likes to indulge in one of his favorite pastimes: video games. "It's an escape from the real world," he said. "You can be somebody you're not. All the frustration you have during the week, you can play some video games and blow off that steam."

The parallels to professional wrestling are clear: Mack looked to wrestling for catharsis during his youth, and he's proud to provide that same kind of escape for young fans watching today.

"If you're going through something bad, remember there's somebody out there going through worse. I was one of them, and I made it," Mack said. "Now I'm a champion in Impact Wrestling on a major TV network. If anybody ever tells you that you can't do nothing, you can be like, 'You can go to hell. Because Willie Mack did it. And if he did it, I can do it, too.'" □



After overcoming incredible hardship, Mack is finally getting a taste of the success he's worked so hard for. Though humble in nature, he hopes to one day be talked about as one of the greats of the X division.



# MORE THAN A BLIP *on* WWE'S RADAR

## 6'8" **JOSH BRIGGS** MIGHT SOON OUTGROW EVOLVE

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

**A**S JOSH BRIGGS lay on the canvas, his thoughts lay elsewhere. He wasn't thinking about the pre-match attack he had just suffered, or the fact that his scheduled opponent, EVOLVE champion Austin Theory, was about to walk out of the building without even defending the title. Briggs was thinking back to eight months before—to the same ring, in the same building—when he was carried out of a match with a dislocated hip. What followed had been a grueling journey of rehabilitation that culminated in him becoming the number-one contender to the title. Briggs was determined that he would not be carried out of an EVOLVE ring for a second time ... especially on the biggest night of his career.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Briggs began to drag himself toward the microphone, and, to the delight of the crowd at EVOLVE 139 (and the dismay of Theory), he growled, "Ring the bell."

Less than 10 minutes later, he was the new EVOLVE champion.

"I remember looking in the bathroom mirror when I was a kid as my dad was cutting my hair," the 27-year-old recalled. "And I told him that, when I grew up, I was going to be a professional wrestler."

From there, it was a foregone conclusion that the Massachusetts native would follow his dream. "When I went to high school and college, I ended up playing football at a pretty high level. But, even then, wrestling was always my passion. I chose not to interview for any NFL teams, just because I was already training to be a wrestler, driving four hours to do so. And I decided I'd rather do that than work out for any pro football teams."

Whether it was his own natural athleticism or the fact that he had watched it his entire life, Briggs picked up wrestling quickly ... and picked it up well. It wasn't long before a phone call came from Gabe Sapolsky, EVOLVE's head of creative.





GET TO KNOW JOSH BRIGGS. YOU'LL BE HEARING HIS NAME FOR YEARS TO COME. THE MASSIVE 27-YEAR-OLD RETURNED EARLY FROM A MAJOR INJURY TO BECOME EVOLVE'S 10TH CHAMPION ... AND HE IS BEING MONITORED CLOSELY BY THE FOLKS IN STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT.



PHOTO BY JERRY VILLAGRANA/EVOLVE



“Josh Briggs immediately jumped out at me after seeing him in places like Beyond Wrestling,” Sapolsky told *PWI*. “It was clear he was a blue-chip prospect with that intangible ‘it’ quality. When I met him, he impressed me with his professional, down-to-earth attitude. And, as I got to know him, I really liked his work ethic and desire to improve.”

And that same desire to improve is a common denominator that has brought some of the best independent wrestlers to EVOLVE throughout its 10-year existence. Having spent time behind the scenes in ECW and ROH, Sapolsky knows a thing or two about revolutionary promotions. But, with EVOLVE, it’s truly been about the evolution of wrestling—and helping develop the next generation of stars. Names like Johnny Gargano, Drew Gulak, and Keith Lee all plied their trade there before hitting it big elsewhere. For fans, the promotion has become the place where you can get in on the ground floor and follow a wrestler’s career journey to the main event of NXT ... or even WWE.

In the months that followed his debut at EVOLVE 104 in May 2018, Briggs’ own career journey quickly



With fans firmly in his corner, Briggs decimates EVOLVE champion Austin Theory with two straight chokeslam-powerbombs before pinning him to win the title.

picked up steam, with company insiders stating that it would only be a matter of time before he was challenging for championships. Just how soon that might have been, we’ll never know. That’s because the early momentum Briggs had came crashing down at EVOLVE 124 in March 2019.

“It was the same move I’ve done a hundred times, including against my opponent [AR Fox] that night. I went up to the top rope and brought him down across my knees. But, this time, it just felt off. When I landed, I ended up dislocating my hip and tearing all the muscles in my hip and groin. I was just in agony, to the point where my body was convulsing.”

Doctors informed him that his recovery time would be four to six months. Briggs had different ideas. Within seven weeks, he was back in the ring. It took him a bit to get back on track, but, once he did, Briggs was clearly ready to grab the proverbial brass ring. And, later that summer, his fortunes began to change.



After hitting AR Fox with a top-rope backbreaker at EVOLVE 124 (above), Josh Briggs knew instantly something was amiss. Though he won the match, Briggs was unable to leave the ring under his own power (right). He would be sidelined for nearly two months by a dislocated hip.



PHOTOS BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN





PHOTOS BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN

Thanks to its relationship with WWE, EVOLVE became the first wrestling promotion not owned by WWE to have a show broadcast on the WWE Network. That show—EVOLVE’s July 2019 10th Anniversary event—was to be the biggest night in the company’s short history.

“I’ll never forget the night before that show,” Sapolsky recalled. “We had a locker room meeting and Josh gave a really passionate speech about it being our time and about us showcasing ourselves. He made himself a leader that night.”

Just three months later, Briggs officially went from being a locker room leader to being company champion. After defeating Theory at EVOLVE 139, Briggs was presented the title belt by an old friend (and EVOLVE alumnus), NXT’s Malcolm Bivens, who made a surprise appearance after the match. With tears in both men’s eyes, Bivens listed off names like Matt Riddle, Chris Hero (Kassius Ohno), and Drew McIntyre—wrestlers who had come to EVOLVE at one time or another because they had something to prove, and then became champions. Now, Josh Briggs could proudly add his name to that list.

“I knew who had held that title before me, and it’s so special to be only the 10th guy in 10 years to win it.” Briggs reflected. “I said when I

started wrestling that I wanted to be in EVOLVE because, to me, it’s the best independent promotion around. And to now be the champion of EVOLVE, and to not only represent the company, but also the legacy of the people who have held that title before me, it’s pretty cool.”

So, with just under four years’ experience and already so much success—coupled with the size and natural athleticism that wrestling promoters crave in a top star—what’s next for Briggs? How does the EVOLVE champion ... evolve?

“I want to be the best wrestler on the planet,” Briggs said without hesitation. “I want people to know that I’m the best wrestler on any show that I’m on. Then, I can retire.”

He may be joking about the retirement part, but Briggs might already be on his way to becoming the best on the planet. His boss certainly thinks so.

“The sky is the limit for Josh,” Sapolsky said. “He has all the tools. However, it’s not just about having the tools. There are a lot of great athletes, but the ones who win the most championships and become legends are the ones who put in the work. Josh has that work ethic. His future is very bright.” □

PHOTO BY SCOTT FINKELSTEIN



Josh Briggs embraces NXT manager (and EVOLVE alum) Malcolm Bivens, who had just presented him with the title belt. Briggs says he’s proud to take up the mantle for a company that’s served as a proving ground for so many of today’s top stars.





**RUTHLESS AGGRESSION? LET'S SAY THUNDER ROSA SHOWS RELENTLESS DETERMINATION. IN ONLY SIX YEARS, SHE'S BECOME ONE OF THE INDUSTRY'S TOP STARS, REIGNING AS NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION. OPPONENTS (AND CRITICS) UNDERESTIMATE HER AT THEIR OWN RISK ...**

PHOTO BY JOHN MOSES/LIGHTNING ONE, INC.



# OBSESSED WITH GREATNESS

## THE FIRE BURNS IN THUNDER ROSA

TEXT BY HARRY BURKETT

**A** **T 5'3" AND** 119 pounds, Thunder Rosa is often outsized and sometimes outmuscled. Yet she'll never be outworked. She's one of the most driven competitors ever. Some might call her obsessed ... she takes that as a compliment.

"I have the heart of a champion," Rosa said. "I don't take 'no' as an answer. From the moment I became a professional wrestler, the word 'professional' has always meant something to me. I always want to look, act, and be a professional. I'm risking my life in that ring, so I take it seriously."

She seems to have come so far so fast. How could a competitor who ranked only 97th in *PWI's* 2019 "Women's 100" suddenly become one of wrestling's most talked-about stars? How could she appear seemingly out of nowhere and become NWA Women's champion? Is this a Cinderella story?

Thunder Rosa lays her boot into Allysin Kay at Hard Times. Not long after, she would pin her to capture the NWA Women's championship.



PHOTO BY EDWARDS DANIEL IREL/LIGHTNING ONE, INC.





Rosa had a star-making turn in Lucha Underground as the reptilian Kobra Moon (above). And, on the indie circuit, she found the perfect partner in Holidead (below), with whom she won the SHINE tag title.



That line of questioning infuriates Rosa. “One year I’m 43 (2016), and I’m really surprised I dropped down to 97,” she said. “A couple of years I wasn’t even ranked! You can put this on record. I am one of the best in the business—not only a professional wrestler, but also a professional MMA fighter. It’s about respect, and sometimes I don’t get the respect I deserve.”

Thunder Rosa earned plenty of respect at Hard Times, when she defeated Allysin Kay for the NWA Women’s championship, a title that traces its lineage back to 1935 and Mildred Burke. That’s the major reason why she’ll doubtlessly be ranked notably higher in the “Women’s 100” this year.

Yet Rosa is correct that she didn’t achieve a “sudden” breakthrough in 2019 or 2020. This flame has been burning for a while.

You might even say Thunder Rosa had a baptism by fire. Soon after her debut in Northern California in 2014, she joined World Wonder Ring Stardom, training under one of the greats of the game, Io Shirai. Matches with Shirai, Nikki Cross, and Starfire made Stardom quite a proving ground.

“I was green, and a person of color,” Rosa said of the obstacles she faced. “That first tour of Japan redefined my mindset as a wrestler, because I overcame so much. The reality set in that I would have to work harder than anyone else. No one was going to give me a handout.”

The very next year, Rosa signed with Lucha Underground as Kobra Moon, leader of The Reptile Tribe. A highlight of her four-year relationship with Lucha

Underground was holding the company’s Trios championship with Jeremiah Snake (Sami Callihan) and Daga.

This wasn’t just any TV gig. Rosa learned the technical aspects of working on a major TV production—one executive produced by acclaimed director Robert Rodriguez and Mark Burnett, who pioneered reality television with *Survivor*. Within two years of her debut, Rosa was refining her skills with Rey Mysterio Jr. and Chavo Guerrero Jr.

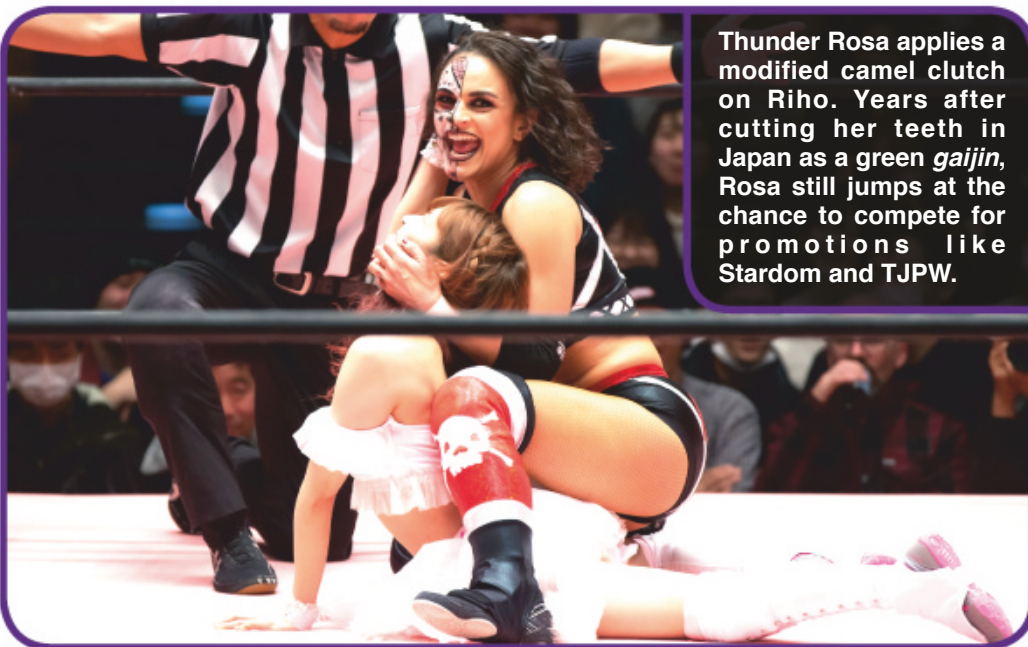
After her foray into Lucha Underground, Rosa realized she had unique chemistry with a frequent opponent, Holidead. Rosa’s husband, Brian Cervantes, saw that chemistry and suggested they become tag team partners. As the Twisted Sisterz, Rosa and Holidead toured the world, winning women’s and traditionally male championships, including the SHINE, Vendetta Pro International, and NWA Western States tag team titles. They also appeared in Ring of Honor.

“Holidead was my wrestling wife,” said Rosa. “We used to live and drink together. We used similar face paint ... we’re like sisters. She was born one day before I was, literally the same year. It’s hard to find natural chemistry like that. She’s family.”

Because of her international reputation, Thunder Rosa received considerable fanfare when she debuted on *NWA Powerrr* in 2019. Many fans wondered why she chose to allow former WWE Divas champion Melina to control her career. Indeed, Melina was using Rosa and Marti Belle to position herself for the NWA Women’s title.

“She helped me in a way. I saw her like a godmother,” Rosa lamented. “But my real godmother never stabbed me in the back. I did Melina’s dirty work, that’s for sure. But that doesn’t mean she can walk all over me. Who is she to do that? Just because she’s Melina? No.”





Thunder Rosa applies a modified camel clutch on Riho. Years after cutting her teeth in Japan as a green *gaijin*, Rosa still jumps at the chance to compete for promotions like Stardom and TJPW.

Thunder Rosa resented Melina's manipulations in the lead-up to her title bout against Allysia Kay on January 24 in Atlanta. With her win, she was able to break free.

And Rosa clearly doesn't need Melina. She's established a global brand all her own: the half-painted face recalling Mexico's Day of the Dead ... her Thunder Driver and signature double stomp ... the successful stints with Stardom, SHINE, and WOW. She's also harnessed the power of social media, engaging her legions of fans with live chats, merchandising promotions, and special events on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

The NWA star is determined to succeed on all levels—a mentality instilled in Rosa at an early age. Born in Tijuana, Mexico, and emigrating to the United States as a young girl, she was inspired by her parents' incredible work ethic. "My parents were very hardworking people who always told us we needed to work really hard in order to be successful in this country," she said. "I've always been very determined since I was little. I always tried my best to be on top of my classes and, whenever I had a chance, in sports."

She made her family proud on February 21, 2019, by becoming a U.S. citizen at a naturalization ceremony held at the Institute of Texan Cultures in her adopted hometown

of San Antonio. (She and jiu-jitsu champion Fabiana Alves Borges were the stars of the class.) Thunder Rosa addressed the audience of new U.S. citizens—over 200 in all, from 40 countries.

"I had wanted to become an American citizen for 20 years, since I was a young kid," she remembered. "It was exciting learning English. It's opened doors in my life. When I was in Lucha Underground, I said to my husband that wrestling would pay for my citizenship, and it did. I got all the basics squared away and then took my test. Then they asked me to be keynote speaker. It was amazing to be in front of people I didn't even know, telling my story."

The ultra-competitive Thunder Rosa achieved yet another goal last November: stepping into the cage as an MMA fighter. She lost that first outing (against Nadine Mandiau) at a Combate Americas card in San Antonio. "Jumping into MMA, not doing amateur and going straight to pro, takes a lot of *cojones* and a lot of training. It's absolutely insane," she said. "But, if I hadn't already trained in professional wrestling, I wouldn't have the athletic ability or endurance in the cage."

With three fights left on her contract, Rosa has stepped up her training and can't wait to redeem herself against her next opponent—who'd better watch out, because she's more motivated than ever.

Indeed, that defeat has only provided more fuel for the fire ... the fire that burns within Thunder Rosa. □



Thunder Rosa is proud to wear the NWA Women's championship belt. The title traces its lineage back to the legendary Mildred Burke (right), an obvious inspiration for Rosa in and out of the ring.





... AND JUSTICE FOR

# GAGE

THE  
REDEMPTION  
OF INDIE WRESTLING'S  
DEATHMATCH KING

TEXT BY MIKE BESSLER

**A**TTENTION MOVIE EXECUTIVES: We have a pitch for you. The life of Nick Gage is full of action, intrigue, and heartbreak. But it's ultimately a gritty story of second chances. Filming locations would span from coast to coast, including fairgrounds, gyms, a bank, and a prison. Depending on how much blood and gore you can stomach, the film will either be rated R or NC-17.

Nick Gage isn't the kind of kid-friendly hero consumers might find on a lunchbox. And he is just fine with that. At 39 years old, IWA Mid-South's "King Of The Deathmatch" has experienced more trials and tribulations than 99 percent of us might endure in an entire lifetime ... and it's made his connection to fans that much stronger.

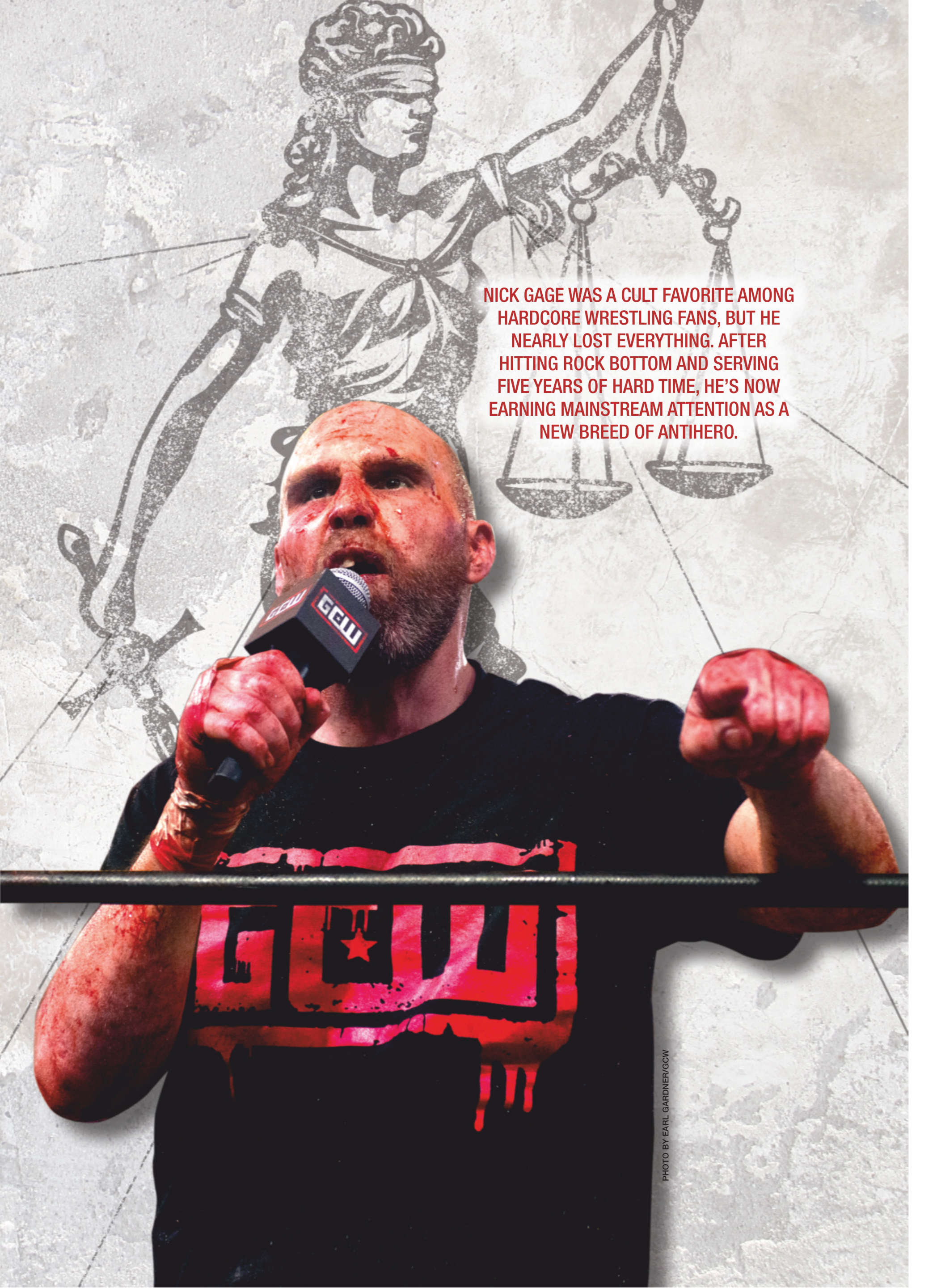
Gage got his start in wrestling in 1998 under the tutelage of Combat Zone Wrestling founder John Zandig. The following year, he became CZW's first heavyweight champion. In the decade that followed, he came to epitomize CZW's ultraviolent style, earning multiple

championships and a slew of dedicated followers. But, behind the curtain, Gage struggled with a foe mightier than any opponent he ever faced in the ring. Over the course of several years, he had developed an addiction to the prescription painkiller oxycodone, which ultimately trapped him in a spiral of pain and desperation.

Although Gage kept his problems secret from friends and family, things came to a head on December 22, 2010, when he robbed a bank in Collingswood, New Jersey. Gage turned himself in to authorities on December 31, the day after being publicly named as the suspect in the case. His notoriety as a standout on the independent wrestling scene brought special attention from media outlets. And, as he sat in jail awaiting sentencing, Gage finally decided to open up to a reporter from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, candidly discussing his problems for the first time.

"Sometimes it's hard when you put all your stuff out there," Gage recalls. "I was good at hiding it. But clearly something



A full-page photograph of wrestler Nick Gage. He is bald with a beard, has blood smeared on his face, and is wearing a black t-shirt with a red graphic. He holds a microphone with the 'GOW' logo in his right hand, which is also bloody. His left hand is a clenched fist. The background is a light-colored wall with a large, dark mural of Lady Justice holding scales and a sword.

NICK GAGE WAS A CULT FAVORITE AMONG  
HARDCORE WRESTLING FANS, BUT HE  
NEARLY LOST EVERYTHING. AFTER  
HITTING ROCK BOTTOM AND SERVING  
FIVE YEARS OF HARD TIME, HE'S NOW  
EARNING MAINSTREAM ATTENTION AS A  
NEW BREED OF ANTIHERO.





After being released from prison, Nick Gage found the perfect home in Game Changer Wrestling—where fans quickly embraced his in-ring brutality and unique charisma.

PHOTOS BY EARL GARDNER/GCW



was wrong if I'm going in and robbing a bank. What am I going to do, lie? Why not let them know?"

That cathartic interview laid bare the personal problems that had pushed Gage to his lowest point. Not only was he addicted to a powerful opioid, but he had yet to come to terms with the death of his mother—who had passed away from breast cancer just a few years earlier. He had also lost his father to cancer when he was only 15 years old. Suppressing grief and loss with self-medication, Gage's life became chaotic and unmanageable.

"I just never wanted to embarrass her," Gage said of his late mother. "I barely got in trouble, and, if I did, it was minor stuff. But once I lost her, I was like, 'Who cares?' Doing drugs, you don't care about anything. You just do whatever the hell you want."

Gage served a total of five years in prison for his offense. But, throughout his sentence, fans stood by him.

"I love the fans," Gage said. "When I was locked up in prison, I would get mail and cards from people I

didn't even know, writing me and saying, 'Keep your head up' and 'Can't wait until you get out.'"

While behind bars, Gage came to realize the size, scope, and human cost of the type of substance abuse that had caused him so much pain. In 2010, his close friend (and fellow CZW wrestler) Trent Acid lost his own battle with addiction. But Acid was far from the only one.

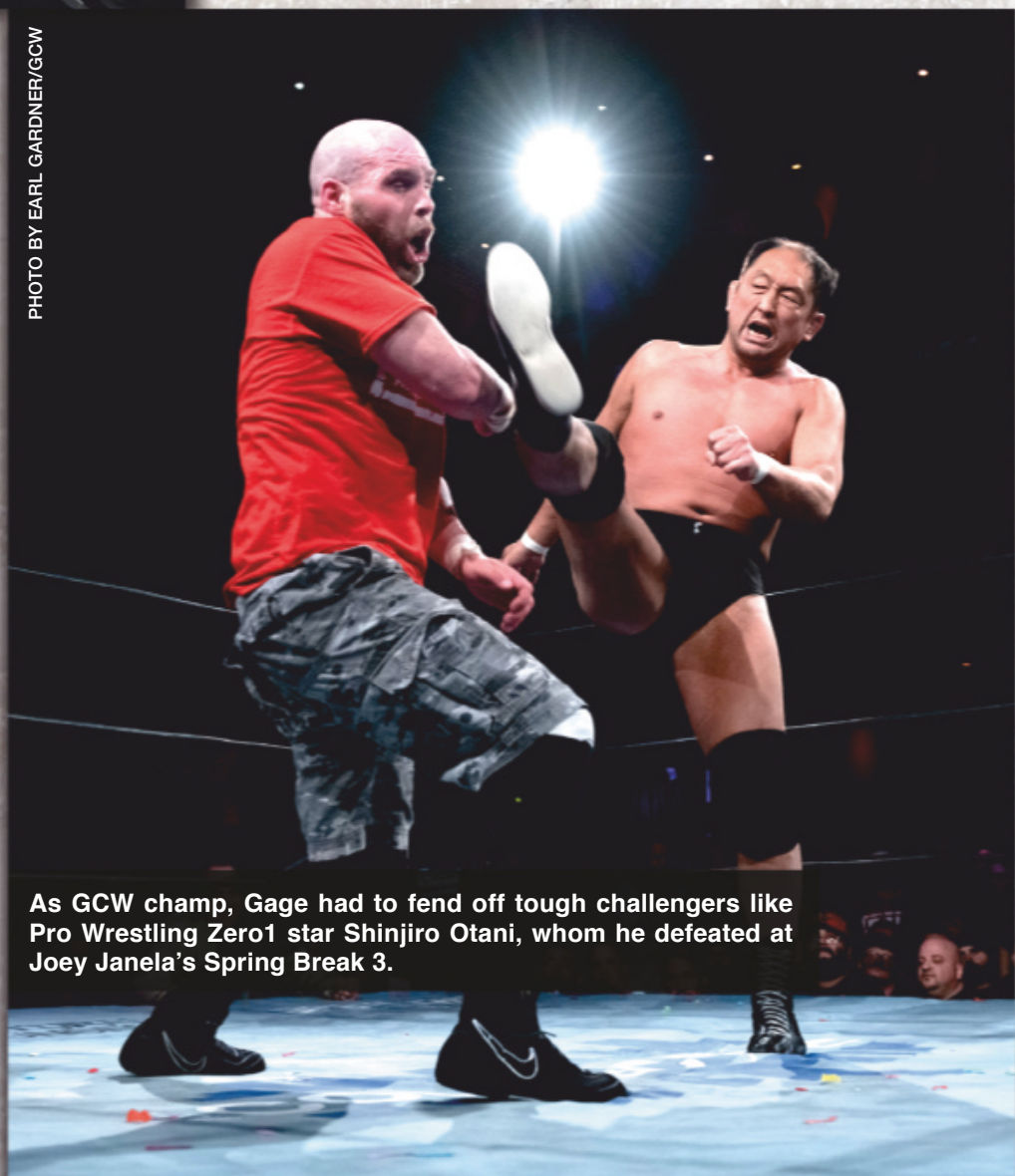
"Once I got home from my prison stint the first time, I went over to my boy's house," Gage said. "And he gave me this list of people we had gone to school and graduated with who'd overdosed and died. And we'd be like, 'that guy?' That hit me hard."

Though shaken, Gage was determined to reestablish himself in the ring. He was welcomed with open arms by the New Jersey-based Game Changer Wrestling—a hardcore promotion cut from the same cloth as CZW.

"I wanted to give back to the fans for writing me all those letters," he said. "So I thought, *Let me put on a death-match show, and I'll call it The Nick Gage Invitational*. Game Changer helped me put on the show, and it was a success."

It was a success; only Gage wasn't there to enjoy it. Due to a parole viola-

PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER/GCW



As GCW champ, Gage had to fend off tough challengers like Pro Wrestling Zero1 star Shinjiro Otani, whom he defeated at Joey Janela's Spring Break 3.





PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO/GCW

Gage punishes Matt Tremont with a light tube in their December 2017 clash for the GCW title. Despite their violent feud, Tremont has nothing but kind words for his old rival.

tion—an issue he now refers to as “B.S.”—the event’s namesake sat in jail, unable to compete on his own show.

Once free for a second time, Gage was determined not to lose his freedom again. He began working even harder in the ring. And that hard work paid off in December 2017, when he defeated Matt Tremont for the GCW heavyweight title—beginning a nearly two-year reign as champion. The only way he could have reached that goal, he insists, was to be totally committed to the business.

“I haven’t had a job since 2007. How can I have a job when I’m on the road all the time?” Gage said. “I tell these young guys, ‘If you want to do this for real, you’re going to find out if you want to be a wrestler or not. You’re going to have to wake up early and catch a plane or get in a car and drive everywhere. And you’re going to have to do it every freaking weekend. If you don’t love this thing, it’s going to eat you alive.’”

And Gage clearly loves wrestling. Due to his undeniable work ethic, raw charisma, and willingness to take risks, he has emerged as a main-event attraction and a locker room leader—an inspiration to fans and peers alike.

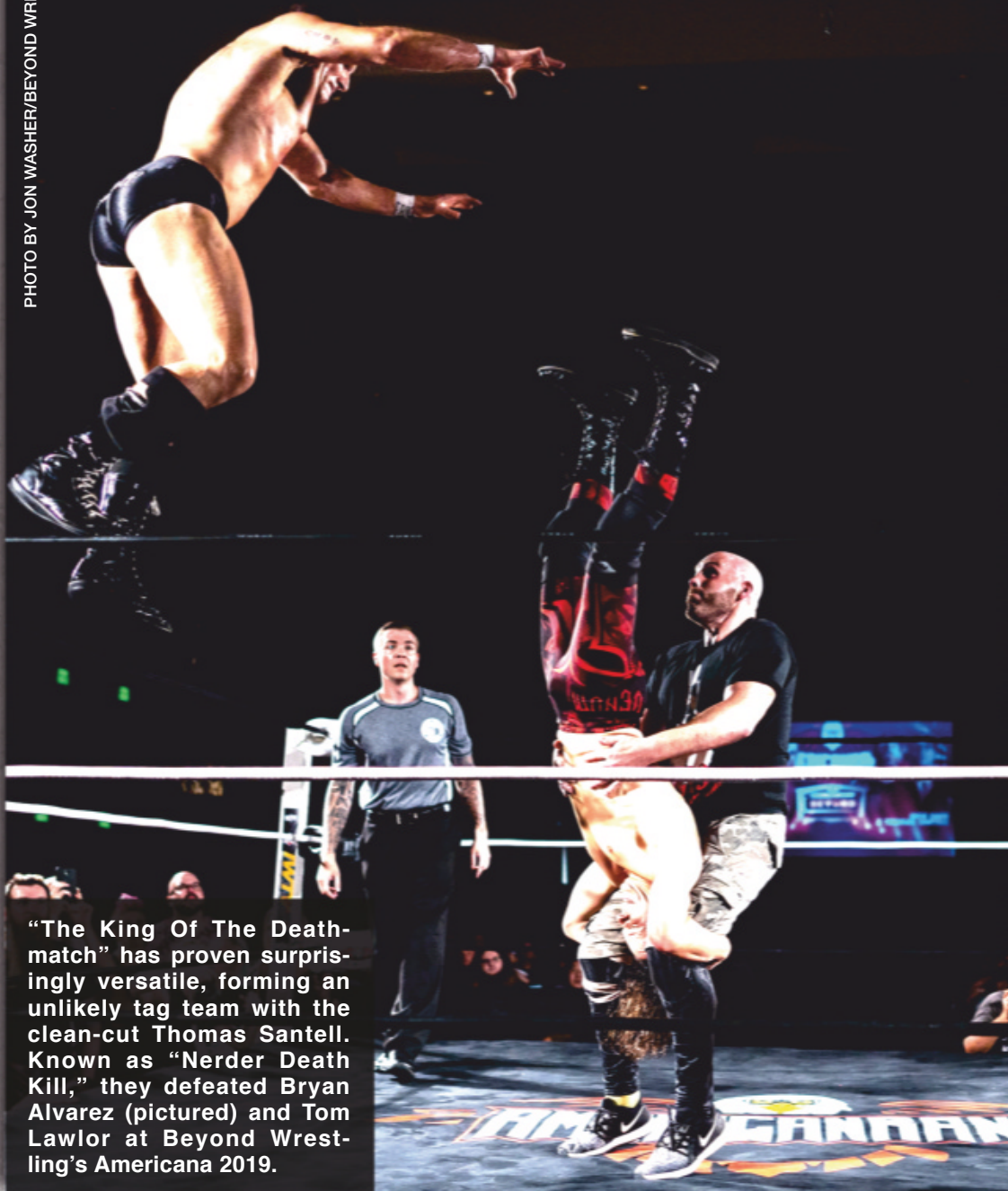
“Nick is great at motivating people,” said Tremont, who knows firsthand how brutal Gage can be in the ring. “As a teenager, he was the equivalent to Hulk Hogan to me. He has always been a positive influence on me.”

2019 proved a banner year for Gage, as he appeared in dozens of promotions all over the U.S. and also competed in Mexico. His willingness to leave it all on the canvas—including pools of sweat and buckets of blood, when necessary—garnered the attention of *Sports Illustrated*, which included Gage in its list “The Top 10 Male Wrestlers Of 2019.”

Like many grapplers, Nick Gage was poised to climb new mountains in 2020, only to be deterred by the COVID-19 pandemic. As confident as he was that he would return to the ring as he faced down a prison sentence a decade ago, Gage says he will be ready for action once the world returns to some degree of normalcy.

“I’m going to come back and just go hard, claim my spot, and see if someone can knock me off,” he said. “I’m going to keep doing this until I don’t like it anymore ... or I die or I can’t wrestle anymore.” □

PHOTO BY JON WASHER/BEYOND WRESTLING



“The King Of The Death-match” has proven surprisingly versatile, forming an unlikely tag team with the clean-cut Thomas Santell. Known as “Nerder Death Kill,” they defeated Bryan Alvarez (pictured) and Tom Lawlor at Beyond Wrestling’s Americana 2019.



# the BUSINESS PAGE

by HARRY BURKETT

**T**he way back ... There are many complicated questions and scenarios related to the reopening of spectator sports. When will fans be allowed to return? Will fans *want* to return? And, when spectators return to stadiums and arenas, what will it look like?

WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon prides himself on leading the way, as he did in the spring by continuing to produce weekly shows when every other sports entity went on hiatus. One possibility is that WWE's touring could be reduced to one-third capacity, with the Raw, Smackdown, and NXT brands taking on various phases of the road schedule. For example, if there were a COVID-19 outbreak on the Raw roster, then the Smackdown wrestlers could keep the tour going, eventually handing it over to NXT.

AEW, after splitting its roster in two at the beginning, now has wrestlers assigned to testing blocks before every event. Interaction among individuals is limited to those in that particular block to prevent cross-contamination.

After Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis declared sports, including pro wrestling, essential businesses in April—allowing WWE to continue taping at its Performance Center in Orlando—AEW returned to its unofficial home, Daily's Place

in Jacksonville, after taping several weeks' worth of matches in Norcross, Georgia. Expect WWE's Performance Center and Daily's Place to host the first live crowds, with reduced capacity and social distancing in effect.

As every major sports entity heeds the advice of health experts regarding when and how to reopen, several analytics groups are collecting data on what live attendance might look like, even breaking it down to specific cities and regions. This is vitally important with the NFL and collegiate football planning their fall seasons.

The Kraft Analytics Group—a Massachusetts-based firm formerly owned by Kraft Sports and Entertainment, which includes the New England Patriots—focused on 30 sports markets to determine the likelihood that fans will return in big numbers. Unemployment figures, business closures, the number of COVID-19 cases, the local response to the pandemic, past attendance, and past attendee

surveys of individual venues were taken into account.

"Certainly our data doesn't suggest that everyone's going to come back at once," Kraft Analytics CEO Jessica Gelman told WBUR-TV in Burlington, Vermont. "But there's a lot of people who will come back, especially if the right safety measures and precautions are in place."

And the findings? Houston is ranked first in fan enthusiasm to return, followed by Dallas, Indianapolis, and Pittsburgh. The study indicates that sports fans in San Francisco, Seattle, and Denver will be slow to return. Cities hardest hit by the coronavirus tend to fall in the "too early to tell" category: New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, Detroit, and New Orleans.

These are strong sports cities, but residents are still waiting to see if the efforts of local authorities against the virus are successful—especially with the threat of a resurgence in the fall.

For WWE in particular, this could mean only running shows at larger venues to maximize the total number of fans. Mid-size towns could be ignored



**Shotzi Blackheart takes down Dakota Kai with a modified bulldog at the empty Performance Center. Harry Burkett believes WWE will invite fans to attend shows at its training facility before resuming its usual touring schedule.**

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altogether. There may be fewer families with kids in attendance, and older, more devoted fans may be more likely to make the trip.

WWE and AEW have maintained a high level of engagement with fans during the pandemic, still producing new content each week and going forward with pay-per-views. Rebooting their respective fan bases won't be necessary.

The state of Texas has emerged as an early model for how sporting events may be held nationwide. College football season is a major concern in the Lone Star State. "My prediction is yes, we are gonna have college football beginning as scheduled ... be encouraged to attend in groups no larger than with at least some level of fans in the stands," Gov. 10, wear face coverings, and maintain six-foot distances from others.



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

**Jimmy Havoc applies a painful hold on Orange Cassidy at QT Marshall's training facility, The Nightmare Factory, in Norcross, Georgia. Although AEW continued to present new programming each week, a lack of live events hurt its earnings significantly.**

## WWE STOCKWATCH

[FOR THE PERIOD OF APRIL 1 TO MAY 31, 2020]

**60-DAY HIGH:** 46.98 on April 28

**60-DAY LOW:** 32.33 on April 1

**52-WEEK HIGH:** 78.76 on July 26, 2019

**52-WEEK LOW:** 29.10 on March 17, 2020

Despite the lack of live-gate revenue due to COVID-19, WrestleMania 36 could still qualify as a success in one area: The WWE Network experienced a surge in subscribers during WrestleMania weekend—reaching 2.1 million on April 6 (an increase of five percent over last year).

That's one of the few bits of good news. The recent release of 30 wrestlers and producers, plus the reduction of executive and board member compensation, has cast a pall over WWE headquarters. But these cost-cutting measures, among others, should save WWE approximately \$4-million per month.

WWE also temporarily suspended the repurchase of stock and drew \$200-million from its revolving credit facility to increase liquidity for the challenging months ahead.

Despite COVID-19 affecting WWE's business beginning in mid-March, the first-quarter of 2020 compared strongly with the first quarter of 2019 because of a huge increase in television-rights fees, from \$135.4-million to \$256.6-million, thanks mostly to its deals with USA and Fox.

Live-event touring and consumer product sales took hits, but it wasn't all due to the coronavirus. WWE had already reduced its number of events significantly, focusing on higher-yield house shows. The company presented 49 fewer events in the first three months of 2020, compared to the same quarter last year. Live-event revenue in North America fell from \$26.2-million to \$17.5-million, while average attendance increased by 33 percent. Fewer live events resulted in lower merchandise sales, from \$20.8-million to \$16.9-million—although championship belt replicas sold quite well.

It will be interesting to see if WWE and AEW—as well as Ring of Honor, Impact Wrestling, and others—will opt for outdoor venues when touring resumes.

**AEW losing millions ...** The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly brutal for AEW, only in its first year of existence. AEW's television deal with TNT has saved the company, but it obviously isn't earning anywhere near its previously projected income.

Speaking on the *AEW Unrestricted* podcast, company president Tony Khan touted that AEW—in its first year—had led the industry in average per-show attendance. "Between Revolution and Double or Nothing, this was going to be the best run of business we've ever had," said Khan. "And we've lost millions and millions and millions of dollars in live events, and I don't take it lightly, but I can't take it out on the people that work here because it's not their fault."

Khan insisted that performers are working of their own accord, and they have the option of remaining on hiatus until the pandemic abates. And, while Khan didn't think it was appropriate to lay off any of AEW's performers during the crisis, he couldn't rule out talent cuts after this is over.



# TV BREAKDOWN

## RAW [USA]

—VIEWERS IN MILLIONS

Analysis: Despite *Raw* being forced to pre-tape episodes in front of no audience at the WWE Performance Center in the lead-up to WrestleMania 36, its viewer numbers remained respectably high. That all changed after 'Mania. Following the April 6 "Monday After WrestleMania" episode, *Raw* has failed to reach the two-million-viewer threshold. It's no surprise the Memorial Day edition of *Raw* dropped to 1,740,000 viewers, but the next week's episode dipped even lower to 1,730,000 viewers. That episode included WWE champion Drew McIntyre vs. the returning Montel Vontavious Porter, and Raw Women's champion Asuka vs. NXT Women's champion Charlotte Flair. Coverage of George Floyd's death and resulting protests across the U.S. bumped *Raw* way down to number 36 for cable viewership, behind Fox News' *Tucker Carlson Tonight* and CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360*.

April 6: 2.12  
April 13: 1.91  
April 20: 1.84  
April 27: 1.82  
May 4: 1.69  
May 11: 1.92  
May 18: 1.76  
May 25: 1.74  
June 1: 1.73

## DYNAMITE [TNT]

—VIEWERS IN MILLIONS

Analysis: The post-Memorial Day edition of *Dynamite* proves ratings can be counterintuitive. While the buzz regarding boxing legend Mike Tyson created the conditions for AEW to draw an average of 830,000 viewers, Tyson's segment with Chris Jericho actually lost to the Matt Riddle-Timothy Thatcher Pit Fight over on *NXT*—although the Tyson-Jericho segment received an astounding 3.2 million views on YouTube. Another counterintuitive fact: Despite the notion that AEW is considered a much better fit for ex-*Raw* tag team champs The Revival (fresh off their WWE departure), their segment actually nose-dived in terms of viewers. *Dynamite* won every demographic except for the 50+ age group, and it's important to note that its overall figures increase substantially when counting the next three days' DVR numbers, which usually bounce the show to over a million viewers.

April 8: .69  
April 15: .68  
April 22: .73  
April 29: .69  
May 6: .73  
May 13: .65  
May 20: .70  
May 27: .83  
June 3: .73

## NXT [USA]

—VIEWERS IN MILLIONS

Analysis: Here's more evidence that *NXT* and *Dynamite* airing on the same night is good for wrestling. The total number of viewers rose dramatically on May 27, the night that Mike Tyson appeared on *Dynamite* and *NXT* countered with the Riddle-Thatcher Pit Fight. *NXT* scored 730,000 viewers—the highest of our evaluation period—and maintained that momentum the following week, coming within 15,000 viewers of beating *Dynamite*. That was very important considering it was the last show before *NXT TakeOver: In Your House*. Both *NXT* and AEW boasted high numbers, considering the ongoing coverage of protests on cable news channels. *NXT* tends to experience fewer ratings fluctuations than *Dynamite*, which is usually the case with shows that consistently rank number two. Those programs appeal to a more diehard, stable base of viewers—in *NXT*'s case, older viewers.

April 8: .69  
April 15: .69  
April 22: .67  
April 29: .64  
May 6: .66  
May 13: .60  
May 20: .59  
May 27: .73  
June 3: .72

## SMACKDOWN [FOX]

—VIEWERS IN MILLIONS

Analysis: Has Jeff Hardy saved *Smackdown*? Or was it the ongoing WWE Intercontinental title tournament? Probably both, because there was plenty of overlap. While storylines based on real-life alcohol and drug addictions are usually criticized—and often don't pan out in the ratings—the Hardy situation seems different. The focus is on Hardy's recovery and ascendance ... and the fact that Sheamus is a terrible bully. While Sheamus framing Hardy for a hit-and-run accident involving Elias seemed contrived, the well-told back-story and Hardy's attitude both seemed sincere. Let's hope the Hardy story works out this time. Yet there were warning signs again, on June 5, when *Smackdown* dipped down to 1,940,000 viewers. And that episode included Drew Gulak's upset of AJ Styles, along with Braun Strowman flipping over a reconnaissance van—with John Morrison and The Miz inside!

April 10: 2.32  
April 17: 2.19  
April 24: 2.01  
May 1: 1.89  
May 8: 2.03  
May 15: 2.04  
May 22: 2.04  
May 29: 2.17  
June 5: 1.94



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not that good a friend), so how  
good does this sound: \$3.50 for a  
single issue or \$2.50 per issue  
with a subscription. We thought so.



# INDEPENDENT ROUNDUP

BY MIKE BESSLER

**B**Y EVERY INDICATION, 2020 looked as if it would be a banner year for professional wrestling, from the biggest of the multimedia monoliths all the way down to the mom-and-pop promotions running shows at county fairgrounds on the weekends. Indeed, independent wrestling looked to be a potential beneficiary of the renaissance created by exciting new developments like the mounting competition between AEW and NXT, as well as the impending infusion of new ideas and talent into Ring of Honor.

Then, COVID-19 happened. And with the advent of social distancing and statewide lockdowns came the delays and cancellations of live wrestling shows everywhere. While AEW and WWE continued by presenting crowd-free shows, the independent scene shuttered almost overnight, leaving scores of indie grapplers with time on their hands and looming questions of what the future may hold.

We spoke with independent wrestlers from around the United States about how they have adjusted to life during the age of the coronavirus ... and what they're doing to pass away the days and months until they can hit the ropes before a live crowd once again.

MCW champion **Kekoa** and his wife **Sammi Pandora**, who is

also a veteran of the indie scene, publicly announced in April that the couple is expecting a baby later this year. Pandora immediately immersed herself in researching how she could be the best mom possible during this unprecedented time. "That was probably the first month and half," she said. "After that, I stopped scaring myself with everything I was reading and decided to just talk to actual moms. I talked

with my mother, sister, sister-in-law, friends, coworkers, my OB/GYN, and just got their stories. And that honestly helped ease my fears." An energetic couple, Kekoa and Pandora have continued to train together during the early months of Sammi's pregnancy, and they regularly document their journey to parenthood via social media ... The pandemic gave **Willow Nightingale** an unexpected break from defending



PHOTO BY AIMEE RUBY

During the COVID-19 shutdown, CZW champ Joe Gacy and his wife, Aimee Ruby, kept in the public eye by producing their own digital TV show on Facebook Live.



the CHIKARA Campeonatos de Parejas title with partner **Solo Darling**. She used the ensuing downtime to catch up on some pressing tasks around the house. “I spent the first month of self-quarantine cleaning, rearranging, and redecorating my home a bit. I moved to a new city in October and hadn’t fully settled in due to a limited amount of free time,” she explained. “Aside from that, I’ve been spending most of my time doing yoga and sewing new wrestling gear.” Nightingale noted that she has always enjoyed interacting with people at wrestling shows, and she can’t wait to hit the road again ... Mississippi journeyman **Barry Wolf** has done his best to stay connected to the wrestling world—boning up on the craft even as he convalesces. “I study old tapes two nights out of the week, with the other nights being designated for family,” Wolf said. “When you are constantly on the road, you sometimes forget the simple things in life are what you need. I have been able to heal my body with some much-needed rest. But, at the same time, my body is missing the ring.” ... After COVID-19 brought **Karen BamBam’s** “Squish Express” to a temporary halt, the East Coast grappler took the initiative to launch a few new endeavors, including a home-based crochet business and some online video projects. “One show I am working on is a variety show for the independent wrestling scene,” she said. “We are filming socially distant episodes right now, but we intend to make it a fun platform for the East Coast scene when things open up.” ... Reigning CZW champ (and EVOLVE trainer) **Joe Gacy** passes evenings during the lockdown by hosting Facebook Live shows with his wife and co-host, Aimee Ruby. Pop culture enthusiasts,



PHOTO BY HARRY AARON

**Willow Nightingale has been settling in to her new home and sewing new wrestling gear in anticipation of a return to the ring.**

the duo use the video platform to discuss their favorite things, from music and movies to the best places to eat at Disney theme parks. “Aimee has a lot of input,” Gacy said. “On our ‘top five’ lists, we both pick topics to cover, and she provides her own list. She helps out a lot on my *Mind of the Maniac* web show as well.” Gacy said the Facebook Live series has yielded a lot of positive feedback from audiences, noting that the experience has helped him to stay connected with fans ... When he’s not working out in his home gym or jogging, “Winged Warrior” **Icarus** has been binging old school wrestling, watching a lot of matches featuring The Legion of Doom and The Rockers. He has also developed an affinity for assembling *Star Wars* Lego sets. “I got a pretty sweet Millennium Falcon and a Kylo Ren shuttle,” he proudly noted ... Ohio grappler and self-proclaimed “Pinterest Prince” **Tom McClane** has been hard at work crafting a life-sized replica of the shield sported by He-Man in the original line of *Masters of the Universe* toys. He says it’s

just for display—not to be used in cosplay—but it’s worth noting he also has a life-sized replica of He-Man’s power sword. Plus, He-Man’s alter ego was a prince, too. So, if McClane ever shows up at a local show wearing fuzzy briefs and riding a giant green cat, don’t be too surprised ... In early June, as various independent wrestling promotions throughout the country began planning limited outdoor events—or otherwise preparing for some kind of eventual return to normalcy—grapplers at every level continued to demonstrate the undeniable work ethic and dedication to craft that has made for a thriving national wrestling scene. To be sure, some of these performers undertook side hustles designed to keep eyes on them or to generate some additional income during these tough times. But these endeavors also provided a needed outlet for enterprising wrestlers who would love to be doing nothing more than locking horns with their peers inside the squared circle. Hopefully, in due time, they’ll be able to do exactly that once again. □



# INTERNATIONAL REPORT

BY KEVIN McELVANEY

**M**ONTHS AFTER SOCIAL distancing began, promotions across the globe continued to feel the effects of COVID-19. Despite being a cornerstone of contemporary Mexican culture, lucha libre remained dormant through the spring. British and European wrestling was virtually nonexistent. And, though some Japanese promotions continued to soldier on to varying degrees,  *puroresu*  suffered greatly in Japan.

On April 15, representatives from Japan's top promotions met with semi-retired grappler **Hiroshi Hase**, who serves as the country's Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. Hase greeted talent and officials from companies including New Japan, All Japan, World Wonder Ring Stardom, Dramatic Dream Team, and Pro Wrestling NOAH.

On that day, the Japanese pro wrestling industry appeared united in finding a safe path forward for the industry, requesting COVID-19 testing kits, as well as compensation and full benefits for all contracted wrestlers. To put this into proper perspective, imagine wrestlers and executives from WWE, AEW, Ring of Honor, SHIMMER, and the National Wrestling Alliance petitioning a member of President Trump's cabinet for federal stimulus funds.

As a legend of the squared circle himself, Hase was clearly sympathetic to the concerns of his fellow competitors. "There are measures we can enact to assist enterprises, promotions, and wrestlers during these times, and I would like to continue to discuss them further," he said. "This situation will not last forever. Speedy and accurate testing, effective

treatment, and medicinal development are all things the whole world is working together on."

Hase's receptiveness was especially welcome during an uncertain time for Japanese pro wrestling. The April 15 event also featured words from some of the nation's top stars. World of Stardom champion **Mayu Iwatani** offered a candid account of how the outbreak had affected her both personally and professionally.

"On February 19, I was scheduled to have a birthday party event, which was canceled. On March 8, we streamed a live event with no fans in Korakuen Hall, but since then there have been cancellations after cancellations," Iwatani said. "We list our occupations as professional wrestlers, but to not have matches is, of course, incredibly frustrating. If we have access to testing kits for wrestlers



Representatives from Japan's top wrestling promotions met with wrestler-turned-politician Hiroshi Hase to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the business ... and to ask the government's help in protecting wrestlers.



and staff, it can put minds at ease and help us return to active duty. Rather than sitting and waiting for an unclear point in the future, to be able to take some kind of action like we're doing today is something I'm extremely grateful for. I hope this can help the entire industry come back strong."

New Japan star **Hiroshi Tanahashi** expressed similar concerns about wrestlers not being able to make a living. However, he also cautioned against going back too quickly to business as usual—noting that wrestling's eventual return will signal a true victory over COVID-19.

"In the world of sports, be that baseball, soccer, or sumo, I feel that professional wrestling should be the anchor," Tanahashi said. "I think it should be acceptable for professional wrestling to be the last sport to return to full activity. I want people to know that when professional wrestling is back, then and only then it means truly that Japanese entertainment has properly recovered."

Hiroshi Hase agreed with Tanahashi's sentiments. "Professional wrestling has a huge and very important role in raising the flag of victory over COVID-19," he said. "I ask all staff members and all wrestlers to keep working to be in the best shape possible to spread joy to the fans with incredible matches very soon."

Despite a continued national state of emergency, there were indeed live wrestling events in Japan through the spring months. Most of those events were filmed with no fans in attendance, but a handful of shows took place before small crowds.

Before the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo were officially postponed to 2021, there was a brief campaign to once again hold live sporting events in front of fans. One such show was All Japan

Pro-Wrestling's Dream Power Series—an annual event held in late March—which took place at the iconic Tokyo venue, Korakuen Hall.

Steps were taken to reduce the spread of COVID, such as handing out masks and taking the temperature of attendees before they entered the building. However, this was still a smaller-scale event, with just over 1,200 fans in attendance. (Korakuen Hall can accommodate 2,000 people at capacity.)

Despite COVID-related anxiety, All Japan put on an exciting seven-match show. In the penultimate contest, **Isami Kodaka** and **Yuko Miyamoto** defeated **Jake Lee** and **Koji Iwamoto** to capture the All Asia tag team title. As reported last issue, the big news was the main event, in which **Suwama** pinned All Japan Triple Crown heavyweight champion **Kento Miyahara**—ending his opponent's 519-day reign with the title.

The following night, March 24, World Wonder Ring Stardom presented what would be its final live event for the foreseeable future. This was the promotion's annual Cinderella tournament, in which the winner gets a shot at a championship of her choosing. This year, the winner was **Giulia**, a veteran of the Ice Ribbon promotion who debuted with Stardom last fall. Giulia picked up wins over **Jungle Kyona**, **Momo Watanabe**, and **Syuri** before defeating **Natsuko Tora** in the finals.

At a DDT TV taping, Chris Brookes and Shunma Katsumata battled it out in a brutal hardcore match. Though Katsumata had the upperhand on Brookes here, the English grappler would ultimately prevail.



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While Stardom remained effectively shut down following the Cinderella tournament, All Japan continued to run empty-arena shows throughout April and May. In the main event of its May 5 TV show, Suwama and **Shuji Ishikawa** successfully defended the AJPW tag team championship against Kento Miyahara and **Yoshitatsu**.

Meanwhile, Dramatic Dream Team offered up new empty-arena events on its DDT Universe streaming service. And, with wrestling fans worldwide under quarantine, there was a receptive global audience for other promotions on YouTube. Said fans were able to enjoy new programming from companies such as Ice Ribbon and Gato Move (founded by AEW's **Emi Sakura**).

As in the United States, the international wrestling community's response to COVID-19 has varied quite a bit. Some companies have opted to buckle down for now, while others are trying to stay relevant—and visible—during unprecedented times. □





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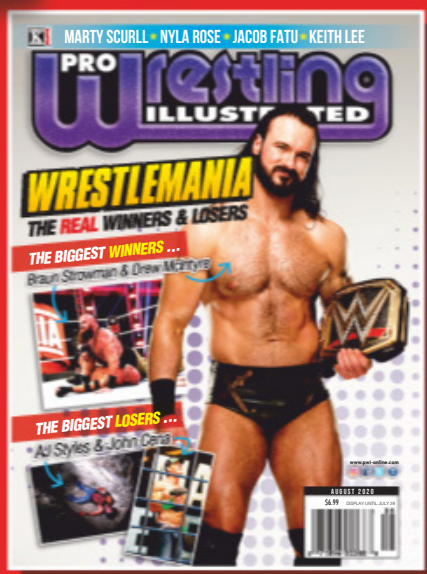
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PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED welcomes readers' comments on any of our stories or columns.



## WRESTLEMANIA 36

Every year, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* does a deep dive into WrestleMania—revealing the real winners and losers beneath the surface of each match. This year's incredibly unconventional event made that task slightly harder ... and our readers also had plenty to say about the two-night affair.

"You guys got it right with the cover of your August 2020 issue," said Clay Atwater. "Braun Strowman really was the biggest winner, especially after all the times he's been robbed of World titles in the past."

"As a huge Philadelphia Eagles fan, I never thought I'd say this, but Rob Gronkowski got a raw deal," admitted John Devitt. "His official WWE debut was a joke segment on the weirdest WrestleMania ever."

"Good article about WrestleMania, as usual," said Donna Marcucci. "But if I could add one more winner and loser for the whole show, it'd be the fans. The fans lost because, all told, this wasn't a great, historic event like we may have been wanting. One the other hand, the fact WrestleMania even happened has to be seen as a win."

## WORST. MANIA. EVER!!!

This was the worst WrestleMania ever, and not because of no fans and the awkwardness of the event. It is the worst because of the Boneyard garbage with the Underfaker. I hope this was his last match. The fact that bad Syfy Channel Show Match was a part of WrestleMania is a disgrace. I have already demanded my money back from the WWE.

TIM KREBS  
Oshkosh, WI

## NYLA GROWS

I was happy to see Nyla Rose interviewed ("Hotseat," August 2020). She seems so menacing on TV, but she couldn't have been more different in print. A lot of wrestlers seem to walk around like they know everything, and she clearly wants to keep growing. It's refreshing to see a down-to-earth, grateful person find success in the ring. I hope Nyla gets that long title reign she's after.

LYNN KIRKWOOD  
Durham, NC

## MORE ORTON FOR BECKY

After a few lackluster stop/start pushes, Randy Orton is finally back where he belongs. His feud with Edge has shown that when given a chance to shine, he delivers. Sure, his style may not be what a lot of today's high spot lovers like, but as an old-school fan, there's nobody better. He does the most with the least, and he and

Edge are showing what two old-school in-ring storytellers can do. If it doesn't get Feud of the Year this year, I quit. Oh yeah ... more RKO in the mag, please. If you include an Orton pic in the letters section, that'd be cool, too.

BECKY GRAHAM  
Columbus, OH

## ADVANTAGE: AEW

My friends and I watched part of *NXT* and *Dynamite* on March 18. I say part of *NXT* because of how bored we were. It was nothing but Gargano and Ciampa taking a stroll down memory lane the entire time. I understand



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

Randy Orton has a big fan in Becky Graham, who thinks we should include more photos of "The Viper" in the magazine. We're happy to oblige with this photo of a dapper-looking Orton. Enjoy, Becky!



Kazuchika Okada cinches in a headlock on then-IWGP champ AJ Styles at ROH/NJPW War of the Worlds 2014. Nico Anselmo thinks *PWI* readers should have chosen Okada (not Styles) as Wrestler of the Decade.



PHOTO BY ANDREA KELLAWAY/RING OF HONOR

that they were seriously injured in the previous week's heinous brawl, and fans weren't there due to the coronavirus. But if there were no fans, they should've tried *Dynamite*'s trick and had NXT talent as the fans.

I enjoyed *Dynamite* because Cody made sure to acknowledge the fans' courage and hope for continued optimism. They STILL had pyro, STILL had entrance music, and STILL had entertainment with two kickass matches when the show started. Not to mention, the behavior of some front-row talent like MJF and Shawn Spears was hilarious, with the first match ending and MJF getting in Shawn's grill and saying "IN ... YOUR ... FACE!"

In other words, *NXT* had nothing to do with the next generation of wrestlers, and instead had everything to do with a rivalry that I could care less about, while *Dynamite* worked its ass off to stay relevant, despite zero outside fans. *NXT* and *Raw* are getting scarily similar. No steak, and not much sizzle either.

JUSTIN SHELUGA  
Reading, PA

## A SHAME ABOUT REY

Was anyone else really bummed out about Rey Mysterio not com-

peting at WrestleMania? I was super excited by the idea of him beating Andrade for the U.S. title. How sweet would it have been to see him hit the 619 on Andrade, connect with the West Coast Pop, and get the 1-2-3?

Of course, everyone's health is what matters. And even if that match had happened, there's no guarantee Rey would've won. It would've been really nice to see, though.

JOSH BROWN  
Randolph, VT

## HEROES & VILLAINS

I'll admit I didn't know much about Marty Scurll before reading "O Villain, My Villain" (August 2020), but I don't understand how he's a bad guy. He seems like a nice dude, and he's even taking pictures with kids! That just doesn't sit right with me.

I admit that I do like his look and his beliefs about the wrestling business. I even went and checked out some of his matches. He is a good athlete!

I don't know ... maybe I'm overthinking this. But would it kill a heel to act more like a heel in public?

ANTHONY FORD  
Bristol, CT

## DECADE MISTAKE

Please reconsider the faith you show in your readership. Kazuchika Okada has main-evented *Wrestle Kingdom* six times, has had the most title defenses (30) and combined days as champion (1,700+) in NJPW history, and yet he is not Wrestler of the Decade?! The IWGP heavyweight championship is looked at with more prestige by pro wrestling fans around the world than any other promotion's top title.

AJ Styles made the big stage (WWE) in 2016, and like most "superstars" as of late, had made a name for himself outside the company (NJPW). The AJ Styles you see today is not the same AJ Styles that brought himself to the dance. Let us be truly objective: AJ Styles only made a major splash in the business this past decade after he entered NJPW in 2014 and became leader of The Bullet Club. And sadly, he has been living off that two-year run ever since.

NJPW is to Olympic ice skating as WWE is to Ice Capades. Same can be said about the difference between Okada and Styles. My hope is that voting will go back to the *PWI* staff and out of the hands of its readers. Injustice was done this go-around.

NICO ANSELMO  
Eustis, FL □



# PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED  
JUNE 8, 2020

## TOP 10

- 1 JON MOXLEY**  
224, Cincinnati, OH  
(3) AEW World champion
- 2 DREW McINTYRE**  
265, Ayr, Scotland  
(1) WWE heavyweight champion
- 3 BRAUN STROWMAN**  
385, Sherrills Ford, NC  
(4) WWE Universal champion
- 4 TETSUYA NAITO**  
225, Tokyo, Japan  
(2) IWGP World/Intercontinental champion
- 5 ADAM COLE**  
210, Panama City, FL  
(5) NXT heavyweight champion
- 6 RUSH**  
225, Jalisco, Mexico  
(6) ROH heavyweight champion
- 7 TESSA BLANCHARD**  
125, Charlotte, NC  
(8) Impact heavyweight champion
- 8 JACOB FATU**  
285, Sacramento, CA  
(9) MLW heavyweight champion
- 9 CODY RHODES**  
220, Atlanta, GA  
(-) AEW TNT champion
- 10 APOLLO CREWS**  
240, Sacramento, CA  
(-) WWE U.S. champion



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

JON MOXLEY

## TAG TEAMS

- 1 BIG E & KOFI KINGSTON**  
Combined weight: 498 pounds  
(-) Smackdown tag team champions
- 2 KENNY OMEGA & ADAM PAGE**  
Combined Weight: 442 pounds  
(2) AEW World tag team champions
- 3 MONTEZ FORD & ANGELO DAWKINS**  
Combined weight: 492 pounds  
(3) Raw tag team champions
- 4 MARCEL BARTHEL & FABIAN AICHNER**  
Combined weight: 440 pounds  
(-) NXT tag team champions
- 5 HIROSHI TANAHASHI & KOTA IBUSHI**  
Combined weight: 428 pounds  
(5) IWGP World tag team champions
- 6 JAY LETHAL & JONATHAN GRESHAM**  
Combined weight: 400 pounds  
(6) ROH tag team champions
- 7 ETHAN PAGE & JOSH ALEXANDER**  
Combined weight: 480 pounds  
(10) Impact Wrestling tag team champions
- 8 SUWAMA & SHUJI ISHIKAWA**  
Combined weight: 552 pounds  
(8) All Japan tag team champions
- 9 ELI DRAKE & JAMES STORM**  
Combined weight: 464 pounds  
(9) NWA tag team champions
- 10 CHUCK TAYLOR & TRENT**  
Combined weight: 404 pounds  
(-) No. 1 contenders AEW tag team title

## WWE RAW

WWE Champion:

**DREW McINTYRE**

(C) 265, Ayr, Scotland

- 1—APOLLO CREWS**  
(-) 240, Sacramento, CA
- 2—ALEISTER BLACK**  
(5) 215, Amsterdam, Holland
- 3—KEVIN OWENS**  
(3) 266, Marienville, QC
- 4—SETH ROLLINS**  
(7) 227, Davenport, IA
- 5—BOBBY LASHLEY**  
(9) 273, Colorado Springs, CO
- 6—ANDRADE**  
(2) 210, Gomez Palacio, Mex.
- 7—AUSTIN THEORY**  
(-) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 8—RICOCHET**  
(6) 188, Paducah, KY
- 9—ANGEL GARZA**  
(-) 205, Monterrey, Mexico
- 10—BUDDY MURPHY**  
(-) 227, Melbourne, Australia

## SMACKDOWN

Universal Champion:

**BRAUN STROWMAN**

(C) 385, Sherrills Ford, NC

- 1—OTIS**  
(-) 311, Duluth, MN
- 2—BRAY WYATT**  
(4) 286, Brooksville, FL
- 3—DANIEL BRYAN**  
(5) 210, Aberdeen, WA
- 4—JEFF HARDY**  
(9) 225, Cameron, NC
- 5—ELIAS**  
(-) 217, Pittsburgh, PA
- 6—SHEAMUS**  
(-) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 7—AJ STYLES**  
(-) 218, Gainesville, GA
- 8—DOLPH ZIGGLER**  
(10) 218, Hollywood, FL
- 9—BIG E**  
(-) 285, Tampa, FL
- 10—CESARO**  
(7) 232, Lucerne, Switzerland

## AEW

World Heavyweight Champion:

**JON MOXLEY**

(C) 224, Cincinnati, OH

- 1—CODY RHODES**  
(3) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 2—MJF**  
(5) 216, Plainview, NY
- 3—BRIAN CAGE**  
(-) 268, Chico, CA
- 4—BRODIE LEE**  
(10) 275, Rochester, NY
- 5—KENNY OMEGA**  
(5) 229, Winnipeg, MB
- 6—CHRIS JERICHO**  
(1) 227, Winnipeg, MB
- 7—LANCE ARCHER**  
(-) 265, Gause, TX
- 8—JUNGLE BOY**  
(-) 150, Los Angeles, CA
- 9—DUSTIN RHODES**  
(-) 232, Austin, TX
- 10—MATT HARDY**  
(-) 236, Cameron, NC

## IMPACT

Heavyweight Champion:

**TESSA BLANCHARD**

(C) 125, Charlotte, NC

- 1—WILLIE MACK**  
(2) 280, Los Angeles, CA
- 2—MOOSE**  
(5) 295, Atlanta, GA
- 3—ACE AUSTIN**  
(3) 190, Atlantic City, NJ
- 4—TREY MIGUEL**  
(6) 172, Toledo, OH
- 5—HERNANDEZ**  
(7) 285, Houston, TX
- 6—SAMI CALLIHAN**  
(1) 207, Bellefontaine, OH
- 7—MICHAEL ELGIN**  
(-) 245, Toronto, ON
- 8—CHRIS BEY**  
(9) 180, Alexandria, VA
- 9—JOSEPH P. RYAN**  
(-) 210, Hollywood, CA
- 10—JOSH ALEXANDER**  
(4) 240, Toronto, ON



Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. These ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue. If you're a promoter wishing to make a submission to the agate-sized ratings, email us at pwireresults@yahoo.com (please put the word "ratings" in the subject line).

**ALL JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING: CHAMPION**—SUWAMA; **1**—Shotaro Ashino; **2**—Jake Lee; **3**—Shuji Ishikawa; **4**—Yuma Aoyagi; **5**—Susumu Yokosuka; **6**—Yoshitatsu; **7**—Yusuke Kodama; **8**—Kento Miyahara; **9**—Hikaru Sato; **10**—Koji Iwamoto

**CATALYST WRESTLING: CHAMPION**—Colby Corino; **1**—Homicide; **2**—KC Navarro; **3**—Ghost Shadow; **4**—Darius Carter; **5**—Steve Gibki; **6**—Anthony Gangone; **7**—Anthony Bowens; **8**—Lou Bruno; **9**—O'Shay Edwards; **10**—Carter Mason

**CONSEJO MUNDIAL DE LUCHA LIBRE: CHAMPION**—Ultimo Guerrero; **1**—Caristico; **2**—Volador Jr.; **3**—El Terrible; **4**—Niebla Roja; **5**—El Cavernario; **6**—Stuka Jr.; **7**—El Cuatrero; **8**—Titan; **9**—Soberano Jr.; **10**—Mistico

**DRAMATIC DREAM TEAM: CHAMPION**—Tetsuya Endo; **1**—Masato Tanaka; **2**—Konosuke Takeshita; **3**—Daisuke Sasaki; **4**—Shinya Aoki; **5**—Danshoku Dino; **6**—Kazusada Higuchi; **7**—HARASHIMA; **8**—Chris Brookes; **9**—Soma Takao; **10**—Akito

**EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: CHAMPION**—Sam Shields; **1**—Eric Martin; **2**—Joey Ace; **3**—Rey Calitri; **4**—Chris Wylde; **5**—Chris Rockwell; **6**—Jay D Luscious; **7**—Mr. Ooh La La; **8**—Kyle Christopher; **9**—Travis Lee; **10**—Napalm Bomb

**EVOLVE: CHAMPION**—Josh Briggs; **1**—AR Fox; **2**—Brendan Vink; **3**—Anthony Greene; **4**—JD Drake; **5**—Curt Stallion; **6**—Jake Atlas; **7**—Joe Gacy; **8**—Colby Corino; **9**—Eddie Kingston; **10**—Leon Ruff

**MAJOR LEAGUE WRESTLING: CHAMPION**—Jacob Fatu; **1**—Alexander Hammerstone; **2**—Davey Boy Smith Jr.; **3**—Myron Reed; **4**—Brian Pillman Jr.; **5**—Tom Lawlor; **6**—Richard Holliday; **7**—King Mo; **8**—Mance Warner; **9**—Low Ki; **10**—Dominic Garrini

**NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE: CHAMPION**—Nick Aldis; **1**—Zicky Dice; **2**—Ricky Starks; **3**—Thom Latimer; **4**—Tim Storm; **5**—Mr. Anderson; **6**—James Storm; **7**—Trevor Murdoch; **8**—Aron Stevens; **9**—Scott Steiner; **10**—Flip Gordon

**NXT U.K.: CHAMPION**—WALTER; **1**—Ilja Dragunov; **2**—Finn Balor; **3**—Jordan Devlin; **4**—Noam Dar; **5**—Wolfgang; **6**—Trent Seven; **7**—Joe Coffey; **8**—Ridge Holland; **9**—Kassius Ohno; **10**—Amir Jordan

**PREMIERE WRESTLING ALLIANCE: CHAMPION**—JT Hogg; **1**—Tommy Forte; **2**—Bjorn; **3**—Jimmy Fahrenheit; **4**—The U.S. Outlaw; **5**—CRipton; **6**—Randy Forrest; **7**—Kevin Cruik; **8**—Jeffrey John; **9**—Bryan Blade; **10**—Anthony Rey

**PRIME TIME PRO WRESTLING: CHAMPION**—O'Shay Edwards; **1**—Effy; **2**—Trish Adora; **3**—Isaiah Frazier; **4**—Breaux Keller; **5**—Mack Buckler; **6**—AC Mack; **7**—Faye Jackson; **8**—Still Life with Apricots and Pears; **9**—Tasha Steelz; **10**—Logan Laroux

**WESTSIDE XTREME CHAMPION: CHAMPION**—Bobby Gunns; **1**—Cara Noir; **2**—Mike Bailey; **3**—Marius Al-Ani; **4**—Amale; **5**—Daniel Makabe; **6**—Alexander Wolfe; **7**—Jurn Simmons; **8**—Eddie Kingston; **9**—Rotation; **10**—Julian Pac

ROH

Heavyweight Champion:  
**RUSH**  
(C) 225, Jalisco, Mexico  
**1—PCO**  
(1) 300, Montreal, QC  
**2—DRAGON LEE**  
(2) 165, Jalisco, Mexico  
**3—MARTY SCURLL**  
(3) 185, Cambridge, England  
**4—FLIP GORDON**  
(4) 187, Kalispell, MT  
**5—BRODY KING**  
(5) 285, Van Nuys, CA  
**6—VINCENT**  
(6) 189, Warwick, RI  
**7—KENNY KING**  
(7) 230, Orlando, FL  
**8—MARK HASKINS**  
(8) 209, Faringdon, England  
**9—ALEX SHELLEY**  
(9) 215, Detroit, MI  
**10—DAN MAFF**  
(10) 280, Newark, NJ

NXT

Champion:  
**ADAM COLE**  
(C) 210, Panama City, FL  
**1—KEITH LEE**  
(1) 320, Wichita Falls, TX  
**2—FINN BALOR**  
(2) 190, Bray, Ireland  
**3—JOHNNY GARGANO**  
(-) 199, Cleveland, OH  
**4—VELVETEEN DREAM**  
(7) 227, Washington, DC  
**5—TOMMASO CIAMPA**  
(3) 201, Milwaukee, WI  
**6—EL HIJO DEL FANTASMA**  
(-) 198, Mexico City, Mexico  
**7—DEXTER LUMIS**  
(-) 238, Jacksonville, FL  
**8—KARRION KROSS**  
(-) 264, New York, NY  
**9—CAMERON GRIMES**  
(10) 220, Cameron, NC  
**10—TIMOTHY THATCHER**  
(-) 228, Sacramento, CA

NEW JAPAN

IWGP World Champion:  
**TETSUYA NAITO**  
(C) 225, Tokyo, Japan  
**1—SHINGO TAKAGI**  
(1) 212, Yamanashi, Japan  
**2—KAZUCHIKA OKADA**  
(2) 236, Tokyo, Japan  
**3—SANADA**  
(3) 220, Niigata, Japan  
**4—HIROMU TAKAHASHI**  
(4) 194, Tokyo, Japan  
**5—JON MOXLEY**  
(5) 224, Cincinnati, OH  
**6—JAY WHITE**  
(6) 198, Auckland, New Zealand  
**7—ZACK SABRE JR.**  
(7) 187, London, England  
**8—KENTA**  
(8) 287, Soka, Japan  
**9—WILL OSPREAY**  
(9) 190, Essex, England  
**10—MINORU SUZUKI**  
(10) 225, Yokohama, Japan

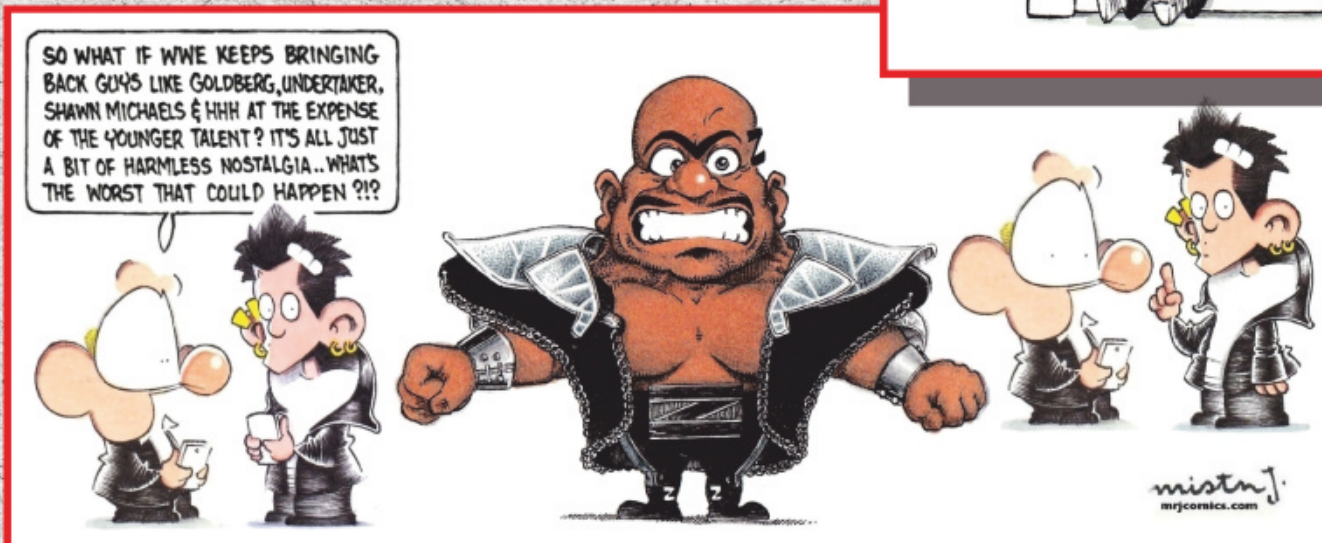
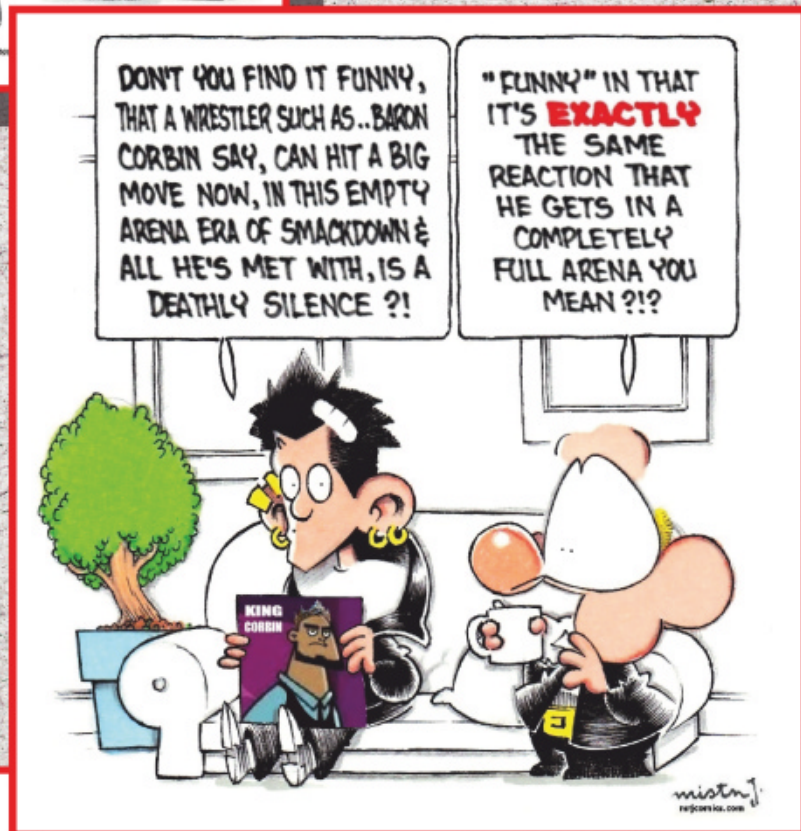
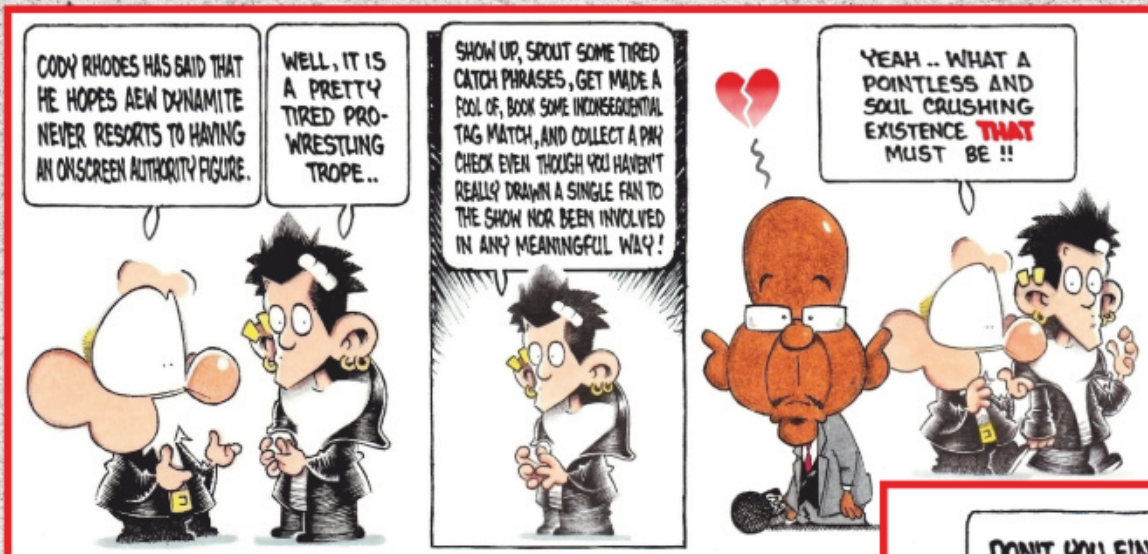
WOMEN

**1—CHARLOTTE FLAIR**  
(2) 141, Charlotte, NC  
**2—BAYLEY**  
(5) 119, San Jose, CA  
*Smackdown Women's champion*  
**3—ASUKA**  
(-) 137, Osaka, Japan  
*Raw Women's champion*  
**4—HIKARU SHIDA**  
(-) 126, Kanagawa, Japan  
*AEW Women's champion*  
**5—IO SHIRAI**  
(-) 119, Kanagawa, Japan  
*NXT Women's champion*  
**6—NYLA ROSE**  
(4) 185, Washington, DC  
**7—NIA JAX**  
(-) 272, San Diego, CA  
**8—SASHA BANKS**  
(9) 115, Fairfield, CA  
**9—BRITT BAKER**  
(-) 121, Pittsburgh, PA  
**10—NIKKI CROSS**  
(-) 119, Glasgow, Scotland



# DRAWING BLOOD

BY JASON CONLAN





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